



Seven - Enceladus

Ripley Oasis buzzed with activity. Spacers hustled through the wide corridors as they went about their business. Despite the amount of foot traffic this Oasis saw, the station was clean and well kept.

Oases were space stations floating above a planetoid at various points around the universe where spacers, humans who lived and worked in space, could refuel their ships, pay for temporary lodging, renew their access codes to utilize dropholes, and mingle with other travelers in the various restaurants and bars. Each station was different in design, some resembling the International Space Station with a central station while others resembled massive spoked wheels. No matter their design, they had the same function.

An interstellar rest stop.

Not too far from each Oasis was a massive ring-shaped portal that would send ships into Faster Than Light travel. These Dropholes allowed safe interstellar travel. Without them, space travel was dangerous. Before the time of ships having the necessary technology to achieve FTL, cryogenic sleep was necessary for even short distances at a time.

Locked in the orbit of a gas giant's moon, Ripley's drophole was a massive marvel of the most advanced engineering known to mankind. Ripley Oasis circuited the edge of Enceladus's gravity field, a gas giant that was twice the size of Jupiter in the Milky Way galaxy. Blurred lines of sandy white, sage green, beige, sky blue and creamy white painted the planet in varying stripes of color. It was the only scenery travelers would see during their stay on Ripley's.

Enceladus looming out in the darkness of space on the other side of the window was what Kade Stanton currently admired. This beautiful planet was the only interesting thing to look at after coming out of cryo sleep.

He and his crew of four had slept for weeks while on their hunt for Kade's bounty. It was here that her last known whereabouts had been traced to. This oasis so far had proven to have just what he needed to find her, to find Ashaki Sawyer. His employers would once again be reminded of why he was good at his job and why they paid him so handsomely in the first place.

Like Miss Sawyer, he was an important asset.

Kade turned his back to the window when the sound of the door sliding open echoed in the small waiting area. He and his crew stepped into the small office of the beady-eyed bureaucrat, Joseph Sloan, he noted with a quick glance at the small name plaque on the messy desk before him.

Joseph Sloan seemed in his mid-forties with a receding hairline and many frown lines to boot. His stiff gray suit was a bit oversized and casually pushed up on his arms. He surveyed Kade and the four men who stood behind him with questioning brown eyes. Wetting his lips and straightening his blue tie, he greeted the waiting men.

"Greetings, gentleman, what can I do for ya?" His gaze swept over each man that occupied the small gray office.

Leaning forward, his elbows resting on a stack of papers, Kade slid forward a data tablet. "I'm looking for this woman. She renewed her access codes with you just days ago according to our intel."

Mr. Sloan squinted his eyes as he took in the digital image of a black woman with golden-brown eyes and corn-rolled black hair. There was recognition immediately, much to the satisfaction of Kade.

"Yeah, she was here alright." He explained, "She was antsy and tried to rush me. Didn't realize this shit takes time. It's not a one and done thing to renew codes. There's a whole damn process, you—"

"I don't care about the process, Sloan. I'm here for the woman, that's all." One of Kade's crew stepped forward, pulling a pistol out of his waistband. It was a popular model that didn't require bullets but instead shot plasma. A small black and yellow striped cartridge housed the needed energy pack.

"I-I understand. Who, may I ask, do you work for? I can't just give sensitive information to anyone, ya know." Joseph sat up primly and laced together his hands.

"The Company."

Understanding flashed through his features momentarily before nodding vigorously and moving to type away at his computer.

'The Company' was colloquial lingo for the Weyland-Yutani Corp. Anyone and everyone knew that they were the biggest players when it came to interests lying in space. The Colonial Marines were their lap dogs, going wherever the company's interests lay, using them as bodyguards and mercenaries.

"Ah, h-here we go!" Stammered Sloan as he finished clacking away at the old computer, sweat beading on his wrinkled forehead. "I'm printing out everything I have on her for your convenience."

Kade smirked, silently signaling his man holding the gun to stand down with the wag of his index finger. "Good. That would be most appreciated. She's very important to the company."

A few minutes later Kade and his men exited the office with the printed information in hand. Kade pilfered through the three pages of sparse data that existed on Ashaki Sawyer.

The make, model, and serial number of her ship, Star Chaser was listed among a heap of useless information. It was listed where the data tracker had last pinged, something that the ship's onboard computer system would automatically do upon exiting FTL. It was a simple built-in software that was akin to an airplane's flight path being broadcasted. With this information Kade Stanton would be able to follow where she had gone.

It was the one downside to using dropholes; all of your travels were tracked.

"Stanton, let's grab a brew while the ship refuels, yeah?" Dennis Payne, his right-hand, suggested. A thumb pointed back down the hall toward the bar they had passed by in the recreation section. Blue eyes watched him in anticipation for a response.

Kade eyed the other three men, their expressions equally hopeful. He had to admit it had been weeks since they'd had a good drink. It would do them good to help prepare for the next leg of the hunt.

He gave them a small nod and followed behind as the three quickly made their way down the corridor, voices of excitement mingling together. Kade was quiet as he joined Dennis and the others in the booth of a noisy bar.

Patrons gathered together around staggered tables, in booths like them, or standing by the windows that lined the back wall. Smoke curled in the air from various cigarettes and cigars. Oldie Rock music filled the background as it played from a hidden player. The smell of food mixed with that of beer and liquor. Synthetics, sentient androids that resembled humans perfectly, served the food and drinks, dressed in stiff gray jumpsuits as they kept the customers happy.

It wasn't any different from a bar on Earth, minus the view of Enceladus outside, that is.

Kade inputted the new data he had on his bounty while the others joked amongst themselves. He folded and studied the papers into his coat pocket once he finished, ordering a nice, cold Porter.

"This will be the biggest payout, yet!" Exclaimed Carlos Vasquez, taking a deep drink of his IPA, condensation beading on the mug he drank from. "I'm going to take a nice, long vacation with the girlfriend. She's been wanting to visit that, uh, planet they finished terraforming fifty years back..." He waved a tatted hand through the air as he tried to remember the name.

"Errr...Prosperity Point?" Chimed in Richard Stanley, his brows pinching together.

Carlos slapped his free hand on the metal table, "Yeah! That's it! That's the one!" He took another drink before continuing, a big hand wiping his mouth. "It's got a bunch of beaches and shit. Women love that romantic tropical crap — especially her."

Kade shook his head grimly. This hunt was different. It would be dangerous. He could feel it. Something tickled at his instincts that he and his men would fight for their lives. He hoped with everything he had that Carlos, Richard, Dennis, and Landon, the quiet one across him, made it home safe.

When he had poured over the data, reading through Ashaki Sawyer's flight logs, he came to a startling discovery. The woman had flown right into Yautja territory.

They were a vicious, savage alien race that reveled in bloodshed and killed humans without mercy. He had never seen one, but he had read accounts of former Colonial Marines who had barely lived to tell the tale. The reclusive species were rightfully feared.

Fear for the lives of his men and his own was at an all-time high. A lot was riding on this mission. A fat paycheck for one, but more importantly was that Weyland-Yutani obtained their new asset. Recent findings had concluded Sawyer would be the best candidate. He didn't know the details, but it sure as fuck was going to be dangerous.

Any other man would've been terrified, but Kade Stanton was no ordinary man.

He was a prolific bounty hunter who had never failed a mission. Every bounty he took had been successfully captured or eliminated. In his lifetime, he had seen the absolute worst of humanity and had added to it. Spilt blood clung to his soul. The sheer amount was too much to be cleansed.

If Hell was real he'd be sent right to it upon his death, and he would have a front row seat on the ride down.

The discovery of his bounty being outside the Human Sphere didn't align with his best hopes. It was a complication. One that he hadn't anticipated, but he would rise above all the same.

This 'Human Sphere' was the area that humans had so far explored out of the entire universe, every colony residing comfortably within the current boundaries. Ashaki Sawyer had inexplicably left the boundary and entered into hostile territory. The Yautja had increasingly been encountered when humans dared to push that boundary; encountering them always ended with high mortality rates and survivors living to tell the tale because they were either gravely injured already or were unarmed, sometimes being a combination of the two.

Ashaki Sawyer was looking to be the most difficult bounty in his career, but the payout from Weyland-Yutani Corp would make it worth the effort. Kade never backed down from a challenge and this wouldn't be the first time.

"Kade,"

He withdrew from his thoughts to drag his eyes upwards toward the smiling face of Richard. The sandy blonde pushed a basket of steaming fried onion rings closer, taking one himself and biting into it as he dipping it in ketchup on the side. "C'mon man, eat up! It's not often we eat this good!" Before he was finished with the one in his mouth, he swooped in for a second.

Kade snorted, partaking of the greasy food himself. "This might be the last good meal we ever eat, fellas. Our bounty is in Yautja territory." The jovial attitudes of the men evaporated but he continued on. "Finding her will be risking our very lives."

He leaned back in the booth, popping another onion ring into his mouth as he briefly cast his eyes to the rest of the patrons eating around them.

None of them knew the true dangers of being a spacer. They only worried about malfunctioning equipment or starving to death in the frigid icicle that is space. Of course, there were other worries but none of them rivaled the danger of what lay ahead.

"Fuck the aliens," Landon scooped, drinking deeply from his mug. The brew sloshed about inside. "We're gettin' this fuckin' money. Aliens or not!"

"You're right, Landon. Carlos? You ready to fuck up some aliens?" Dennis smirked, his eyes snapping to the Latino sitting next to Kade.

"This job is nothing but danger. It's the reason I signed up for this shit. My abuelo's sister, Jenette Vasquez, died fighting bugs. I'll be pissing on her legacy if I chicken out now." Carlos swept his gaze from each man sitting with him, his fingers turning an onion ring over and over, "We're gonna find the bitch and get that paycheck. I got a vacation to plan for."

Collectively they grunted in agreement, Dennis tossing in a "Fuck yeah!"

Kade let the tension ease up in his shoulders and relax among good company. One way or another, they would capture Ashaki Sawyer, Yautja and bugs be damned.

A/N: This is a shorter chapter but you get to meet a new character. I hope y'all enjoy this chapter! 😊

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