

## Chapter 2 — An Offer

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What were these smugglers doing on Lyntessa anyway? The planet had some of the tightest law enforcement in the Commonwealth. Blisscoil was a controlled substance there, desired effects notwithstanding.

I pulled myself back to the plant. One security system down, but I still had not cleared the place. I gathered my wits and moved to the next door. The sign read Filtration Control Room. Handy, especially for my first day on the job. Of course, my job description was a little different.

Hydraulics hissed. A door slid open immediately to my left. Plant staff.

"What do you want? Where's the guard?"

"On the floor. Dead."

"WHAT?!"

"He's dead. Like sleeping, except more permanent. Besides, every one of the Guardians has at least two thousand on their head. Government bounty. Now can I get back to work?"

"No."

"What? Why?"

"You'll never find them all. They're off-planet, left only two on Lyntessa, and you just shot one."

"Blast it all. Two? Where's the other?"

He stared at me over the rim of a respirator, not angry, just adjusting.

"You realize what you've done?" he said.

"Killed a man with a bounty."

"You killed my partner. Which makes you my only way off this rock."

"Funny way of thanking me, Guardian."

"I'm not thanking you. I'm hiring you."

I laughed once, no humor in it. "You don't have enough credits."

"Not in credits. In information. There's a shipment waiting for pickup, worth more than you've seen in your life. Help me move it, and it's yours."

I kept the blaster on him. No reason not to.

"Hiring me, huh? Bold move for a man standing over a corpse."

He shrugged, scales catching the flicker of the console lights. "You want to survive here, you take bold moves."

"Maybe. But you're out of partners and out of time."

"Then we're the same."

I hated it when reptiles made sense. Still, his pitch had a pulse. I eased the blaster down an inch—no truce, just an opening.

He jerked when I eased the rifle down, too fast, too sharp. His hand twitched toward his belt.

I saw it. A blur under the workcoat, a glint of metal, small and curved. Could be a hold-out pistol. Could be a comm. Either way, he was thinking about using it.

"Easy," I said. "You're still breathing because I let you."

He froze, hand hovering mid-draw, the room humming with the sound of the filters. For a heartbeat we just stared at each other, predator to predator, and he slowly lifted his hands away from the belt.

Smart move. I liked my warnings quiet.

I kept the carbine steady while he froze. Then I made a decision.

"Turn around," I said.

He hesitated, but the look in my eyes must have done the talking. I pulled a length of synth-cord from my pack and twisted his wrists behind his back, tight and high. He winced but did not fight; I guessed he knew the odds.

We walked out the front like it was shift change. The alarms were quiet now—my false report must have held.

The night air felt thick and chemical as we stepped into it.

My motospeeder waited where I left it, crouched in the reeds. I secured him to the rear frame, hands bound facing backward. No seat and no comfort. Just cold metal and the hum of the engine.

"Congratulations," I told him. "You're taking the scenic route to Commonwealth authorities."

He did not answer. That was fine. I had had enough conversation for one night.

I thought about the shipment he mentioned. I was not the law, just who the law turned to when they needed some dirty work done. But I would tell them he knew something. Meanwhile, I had bounties to collect.

The bright city lights on Lyntessa felt somehow more inviting when you had some scratch to your name. But that was alright. This planet charged too much for Otenno stout. I would find transport off-world.

Home? No. I doubted I'd ever go back home, whatever that even meant. Expensive drink aside, I was growing to like the Commonwealth. Well, a little. Might just stay a while. Still, this planet was not exactly my style.

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