

Chapter 3 — Unacceptable

GSY 9000-2

Lyntessa Sector

Lyntessa was too clean, too costly, too quiet. The kind of place that polishes the grime right out of a bounty hunter's career. No crime, no contracts, no work. I needed a new system, somewhere that didn't choke on its own order. Who'd have thought the retirement community of the galaxy would be a bad place to be a bounty hunter? But, Colina fit the bill. Same sector, easier on the credits.

The shuttle cut through the upper atmosphere over endless stretches of grassland. Colina's cities are low and sprawling, all solar glass and old concrete, built to hug the horizon. The kind of world that hums quietly instead of roaring. The kind that hides its dirt well.

Customs flagged my firearm. Regulations. Firearms prohibited on Colina. I disassembled the sidearm and kept it in the case under my pack strap. They didn't bother checking for stun batons.

At the local constable's office, I picked up a name, or at least part of one. A Birin male, wanted for murder, last seen in the capital city four days ago. No given name, no clear motive. Tight-lipped and alone. It was something to chase.

I started with the cantinas. The one near the freight docks was full of traders and pilots, the kind of crowd that knows who's been coming and going. I showed the barkeep a scan of the Birin's face. A few shrugs, one longer look. Then a data tap from a regular gave me a hint: a match on a public social feed, barely tagged, but close enough. It was him. Or someone wearing his face.

A lead pointed me toward a weapons merchant who might have dealt with him. I decided to wait until morning. Night was already spilling through the skylights, and my eyes were burning from the recycled air. I found an inn, then a watering hole nearby. Bought a clarbrew for a human with skin to die for. I was impressed, but she wasn't.

After a while, I drifted back to the inn and to bed. Colina nights are colder than they look, and I was half asleep when a knock came at the door. A meal delivery; wrong room, wrong order. I waved it off until I heard the name the server spoke: Klisi Intiru. My mark.

Luck like that makes you stop breathing for a second. I told the server to wait, said I'd walk with them to help find the right door. They didn't question it. I trailed a few paces behind down the hall, trying to look casual. The corridors smelled faintly of disinfectant and cooking oil. The door they stopped at was on my floor. Perfect.

I ducked behind a fragile-looking piece of decorative furniture near the corner. The kind meant to be seen, not leaned on. My pulse climbed while the server rang the buzzer. Nothing. Then, after a long pause, the hiss of hydraulics as the door opened.

"Room meal, sir. Klisi Intiru?"

"Yes."

The sound of his voice snapped everything into motion. I was already moving before I realized it, baton in hand, feet silent on the carpet. Two seconds, maybe less. Felt like a lifetime.

VZZZNNKT!

The charge burst through the air, blue arcs lighting the corridor. The baton hit him square in the trapezius. Humans drop instantly from that. I wasn't sure about Birin physiology, but it worked well enough. He hit the floor with a heavy thud, out cold.

"By the Aether! What are you doing?!" The server's voice cracked.

I holstered the baton, hands open. "Everything will be alright. He's a wanted murderer. I'm bringing him in to the authorities."

"Whiteloam Lodge strictly forbids bounty hunting on our premises. We're going to have to ask you to leave."

"Understood." I fastened Intiru's wrists behind his back. "I got what I came for."

I hauled the unconscious Birin out through the side entrance and loaded him onto my motospeeder. The city's night air hit me like cold steel, sharp and clean. I didn't bother looking back at the lodge.

Another payday. Cr5,500 for Intiru, processed through the Colina Peace Office. Watching the numbers flicker on my credit wallet was the best part of the job. Cr9,994 and counting. Not bad for a day's work.

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