

Chapter 2

Cash awoke to a strange feeling. It was as if he was everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It was quite the annoying feeling; he shook his head to clear the fuzziness.

It was at that moment that he realized he was no longer covered in sand. He sat up.

He looked around. It was dark; he could see the sand dunes stretching for kilometers around him. He looked down; he was sitting on top of the dead Flux.

He jumped up, running towards the wreckage of his bike. He tapped the side of his goggles twice, turning on the night vision, and surveyed the damage.

All things considered, it wasn't too bad. The front struts were a little bent, but nothing a hammer and a half hour of work couldn't fix; the main thing Cash had been worried about was the engine. The bike's engine was the most important part of it, essentially, and if it was damaged, there was no way he'd make it back to his ship.

Fortunately, the engine was intact. Cash was able to hammer out the two struts into usable shape - he could fix it more at the ship - and he gathered up his gear and got the engine going.

About a half hour later, Cash's ship came into view. He sighed happily as he got off of his bike and walked towards the *Adventurous Valor*.

It didn't take Cash long to realize something was wrong - a strange gut feeling had taken hold of him as he gathered up his gear, and he went into the ship still feeling it. As he laid out his various supply stashes on the ground, he realized what was wrong.

The Prism was gone.

The translucent blue pyramid was nowhere to be seen. He swore as he realized that meant he'd have to go back to the wreckage site, and he got out of his ship into the bitter cold of the sand dunes.

He was about to mount the bike when he heard the voice.

"Where you goin', hotshot?"

It came from behind him. He whirled around, a blaster pistol in his hand, ready to shoot. Before him stood a woman dressed in robes whipped about by the wind.

"Who are you?" he asked. "I don't want any trouble. I'm only camping here for the night." He slowly lowered his blaster pistol, holstering it to show that he meant no harm.

"No trouble, Cash Culasso?" the woman asked. "I think not. You came here to raid our sanctuary."

Cash's blood ran cold. He decided in the heat of the moment to play dumb. "Sanctuary? I'm here to get a sand sample." With this, he whipped out one of his false IDs. "As you see, my name ain't Culasso. Never heard of a Culasso, anyways. I'm Myr Sanja, interplanetary relations. And I'm technically on government business, so you'd better back. It. Off."

"You cannot fool us," the woman said. "I am Mej, guardian of the Rast sanctuary. And you have stolen from us. I cannot interfere with the other Prisms, but the Rast Prism is ours to keep, to protect."

"The heck is a sanctuary? Prism? You sound like a geometry teacher," Cash laughed.

"There is no use in resisting. Leave now, and you shall be spared," Mej said.

Cash surreptitiously drew his gun. In the darkness, it was hard to tell if Mej had noticed.

"Listen close now. I'm not in the business for much trouble. So why don't you leave, and I stay, and I can get my sand samples, and you can go back to guarding your important prison thing-" Cash began, but the woman cut him off.

"Your fake identification will not stand with the Rastic authorities," she said, drawing a staff from beneath her robes. "Now, you shall die. I offered you clemency."

"Alright, alright," Cash said, taking a step back. "I just want to-"

He didn't finish his sentence, probably on account of diving to the ground and squeezing off three shots in Mej's direction.

"Where's my Prism, crazy lady?" he yelled, shooting again at Mej, who blocked the shot with her staff. The energy bolt dissipated on the shaft.

"It does not belong to you," she replied in a calm voice. "The Ways do not belong to you, nor do the Cores."

"No idea what the Core Ways are or whatever, but I need that Prism!" Cash shouted. He shot again, this time hitting Mej in the leg. She stumbled to the ground. In an instant Cash had the gun at her throat.

"Tell me where it is," he demanded. "Now."

"No," she said. "I cannot tell you. It is against my-"

Mej gasped as he tightened the pressure on her throat. "Now, I don't care what you think it's against, but you're gonna tell me where that Prism is, right now. My client wants all twenty-one of the little devils, and I never fail to deliver. So."

"N-never!" Mej screamed, kicking Cash in the crotch and rolling out from under him.

"Get back here!" Cash complained, running after Mej. It wasn't hard to catch up; she was limp-running away from Cash's camp. He tackled her to the ground, knocking the staff out of her hand. He threw it aside, making a mental note to pick it up later.

"I need the Prism, and you're gonna give it to me," he said, his knee on her windpipe. "I don't care about Cores or Ways or whatever. I just need the money."

"How... much is he paying you?" Mej gasped out.

"That's between me and him," Cash replied.

"I'll pay you" - Mej coughed twice - "I'll pay you double. Whatever it is."

"And how could you pay me two billion?" Cash asked, bewildered. Nobody he'd ever worked with or knew had that kind of money, except maybe his current client. He figured the Prisms were worth a fortune each, and had actually planned to sell them individually to different buyers for a larger sum.

"I promise... I swear by Ras you shall be paid," Mej said, growing more desperate.

"Yeah, sure," Cash said skeptically. "I'll let you up for two seconds and all of a sudden you'll disappear faster than the hallucinations do when I get sober. Not buying in, here."

"I swore by the chief god of Rast! What more do you want?" Mej said, drawing more breath with each statement and loosening Cash's hold with every breath. Cash was quite unaware of this development.

"Listen, I'd rather fulfill the current bargain I'm entangled in," Cash admitted, though getting two billion for one prism rather than one billion for twenty-one of them did sound lucrative, he was still suspicious and had no idea how this desert nomad would be able to procure so much at a whim for such a small and seemingly useless item. Cash figured it held religious significance of some sort and that was why so many different people were after it.

"Please!" Mej begged. "It's of great importance to us."

"Glad to hear it. That's definitely going to help me sleep at night." Cash's brow furrowed. "Wait, why do you keep referring to multiple people when you-"

At this, Mej rolled out from under Cash yet again, throwing him to the ground. She held up her hand and her staff flew out of the darkness into her hand. She struck three times, knocking Cash to the ground.

"That's because there are two of us," a deep voice said.

Cash swore again. He looked back to where the staff had been thrown from, and saw the black-cloaked man approaching with a staff of his own.

"Aw, come on," Cash complained. "Listen, guys, just give me my prism and we can get out of this, nobody hurt."

"You shot my colleague in the leg," the cloaked man pointed out. "I believe that counts as an injury."

"Okay, listen, stop being so prejudiced," Cash said. "It was in self-defense."

"But you have stolen from us. We have the right to attack you," Mej reasoned.

"Listen, what's the deal with these Prism things?" Cash asked. "And why is a single one of them worth two billion credits?"

"He has no idea what he is dealing with," the cloaked man said, shaking his head. "Unfortunately, that means he is working for someone bigger."

"I already knew that," Mej scoffed. "He was constantly talking about a client."

"If somebody is collecting the Prisms, then they must be after the Cores," the cloaked man reasoned.

"Alistair, our job is to protect our Prism, not the others," Mej protested. "There is no way at all we can interfere-"

"Fifteen sanctuaries have already reported their Prisms to be taken. For all we know, all of those Prisms are on his ship! We could save the Cores!"

Cash took advantage of their bickering to slip two steps away into the surrounding darkness. He grabbed his stun pistol from where it lay, mere feet away from his speeder. He shuffled back through the sand towards the duo as they continued to talk about Cores and Ways and other sorts of nonsense.

Cash held up both of his guns - the stun gun and his blaster pistol - and aimed them at his two enemies. He cocked the stun gun, and Mej and Alistair looked towards him.

"One move, and I shoot you both," Cash warned. "Now, where's my Prism? Any wrong answer will result in one of you dying, because I don't need both of ya to lead me to this Prism thing."

Alistair laughed out loud. That was aggravating to Cash. "Quite bold of you to assume-"

"I'm in control!" Cash shouted. "Put your staff on the ground, both of you."

Mej and Alistair obliged.

"Now, I'm going to count to ten, and if neither of ya have given me a straight answer, on of ya is going to meet whatever god you worship. One."

"Goddess," Alistair noted.

"I don't care," Cash replied. "Two."

"We cannot tell you!" Mej protested.

"Three."

Both zealots were silent.

"Four... five." Cash kept going. Now he was secretly getting worried; his goal was to scare them into submission, not to actually have to kill one of them. "Six," he continued, but his tone was a little nervous now. He coughed slightly. "Seven," he said, edging a warning tone into his voice to try and get the pair to start talking.

"I will never-" Mej began to yell defiantly.

"Fine!" Alistair said, cutting her off as he held his hands up, defeated. "We put it back in the Sanctuary. It's back in the Prism room."

"You sure you ain't got another Flux waiting in there to chew me up, spit me out, and send me into another dimension?" Cash scoffed. "I'd believe that no sooner than I'd believe my mom was immortal. She wasn't, by the way."

"I- what?" Mej said, bewildered.

"Don't ask questions, that's my job," Cash replied shortly. "Least now it is."

"I swear to you, I swear by Ras, it's in the Prism Room," Alistair said, his voice taking on a pleading tone. "Just let us go and we'll return it to you."

"Y'all keep swearing by that god Ras or whatever. I don't believe he even exists."

"Such a heretic," Mej scoffed.

"You be quiet," Cash said. "Now, here's what I'm a-gonna do. I'ma cuff the both of ya, then tie both of you to the inside of my ship, and we're gonna fly to your little sanctuary. At that point, we can talk about where the Prism is. And if any y'all get any funny ideas, well" - he snapped his fingers for no apparent reason - "you'll find yourself buried in the fancy tourist-grabbin' Rastic sand faster than you can say 'heretic'. Got it?"

"It's... acceptable," Alistair said. "At which point you will let us go?"

"I'll consider it," Cash said, and unslung two pairs of laser cuffs. He walked slowly over to Alistair, keeping his guns trained, and cuffed him. He did the same to Mej and then led them onboard the ship.

Cash placed his new captives in the small holding cell built into the back of the ship and then went back out into the cold Rastic night, gathering his equipment from his speeder bike and dragging the bike into the ship's cargo hold. Making a mental note to search the crash site from that afternoon some other time, he powered up the engines and the *Adventurous Valor* shot out into the night.