

## Chapter 4

Cash looked at the map.

It was a relatively simple map - just the entire galaxy, no more - and showed twenty-one dots. Fifteen of the dots were steadily glowing, and six of them were blinking. Cash tapped a button on the map and one of the six blinking stops became a steady green light.

*Sixteen down, five to go*, he thought cheerily. He had no qualms with the fact that he had probably just killed two people.

He set the course for the next planet on the list - Quallop - and laid back in his chair, drifting off into a peaceful sleep.

\*\*\*

One may say that Cash Culasso has no conscience.

That is very possibly true. However, given his upbringing, it's hard to blame him for the horrible things he does in his day to day life.

Cash Culasso, whose birth name was Ruioioi Cuilasso, was born to Loiuuiuiuiu and Luiioioioio Culasso on the planet of Tuioiuioi in the Galactic Year (or GY) 980,104. Of course, the minimalist movement of Veliegr would suggest that the Galactic Year should be shortened to a three-digit number, as any number larger than three digits is viewed by the Veliegririan minimalists to be demonic. However, to keep things relatively simple, we will refer to Galactic Years and their full form. Therefore, let us continue by saying that Cash was born in GY 980,104.

His father, Luioioioio, was a petty thief - considered to be lesser than smugglers on Tuioiuioi, as smugglers brought in much-needed supplies to Tuioiuioiiian refugees - and was captured by the Tuioiuioiiian authorities in GY 980,111, when Cash was just seven years old. Cash is unaware of his father's fate, but seeing as the author of this story is most likely all-seeing and all-knowing, the narrator is aware that Luioioioio was executed by the cruel government of Tuioiuioi for his crimes. This is relatively hypocritical, seeing as the Tuioiuioiiian government was composed of officials who had committed much more serious crimes than petty theft. Cash didn't know his father well, and his mother was killed while trying to steal food from the market to feed her and her nine-year-old son in GY 980,113, leaving Cash an orphan.

Cash was "adopted" by one of his father's oldest friends, Kuioioioioioioioio (who went by Kuioi and for the sake of simplicity will be referred to that way). Kuioi was a smuggler and taught Cash well, giving him the new identity of Cash Culasso - Culasso as a variation of his previous surname, and Cash because he was a very good source of income for Kuioi and his first mate (whose name is rather long and will not be mentioned). Later, Kuioi taught Cash to pilot a starship, and eventually Kuioi's luck ran out on an expedition for a crime lord. He and his first mate were killed in a shootout and Cash escaped in the ship, the *Lady Joiuiuiui*. Wanting to throw off his old identity, Cash changed the name of the ship to *Adventurous Valor*, and began a life of crime and full-time smuggling. He began to gamble and drink at the tender age of seventeen, in GY 980,121. He gained a very good reputation and had always been taught to do whatever he needed to do to survive. He was also taught by his parents and by the smugglers that anything was justified if it granted him any sort of gain, and he lived by that.

\*\*\*

Cash was awoken from his sound sleep by the beeping of a proximity sensor.

*What in the blazes is waking me up his early?* was the question going through his head, but then he continued to observe the alarm, and thought *Wait, that's a proximity sensor!* and shot up, completely awake and alert.

He looked out the front windshield, wiping condensation from the inside and wishing that he had fixed the defrosters when he had stopped on Rast, and immediately jumped back. He took the ship off of autopilot and slowed the engines, falling behind the two ships flanking him.

Those two ships were the reason the proximity alarm had gone off. He looked at the displays and checked the tagged designation of the two ships, and cursed.

The ships were from the Alriskiiian fleet. The Alriskiiians had figured out the secrets of space travel earlier than most other civilizations and people, and had taken it upon themselves to police the general galaxy as soon as they had realized how to travel to other star systems. Their weaponry systems were probably the most deadly in the galaxy. It was said that one Alriskiiian ship could take out a rival system's best squadron and sustain no damage.

And now two of them were flanking the *Adventurous Valor*.

Cash looked at the log-maps and saw that the Alriskiiians had shown up minutes before. From what he had heard, they usually had bounties or blacklists on certain ships or people and scoured the galaxy for them.

And they usually delivered an ultimatum after giving the poor idiot they were after ten minutes or so to wonder what they were in for.

Sure enough, a good three minutes later, the Alriskians hailed him.

"*Adventurous Valor*, this is the Alriskian enforcement squadron R34-771. Please put your engines to a slow burn. Prepare to be boarded."

Cash sped around the control room, pressing various buttons and twisting dials, then turning on the comm.

"Negative, R34-771. Unfortunately, this ship has no airlock system and the only entrance is a ramp. I'd have to land on an atmosphered object."

The comm went silent. In reality, the *Adventurous Valor* had a small but secret airlock - a small airlock which Cash sometimes used for discreet deals. But the best scanners had yet to detect it, and he was fairly confident in his abilities to throw off the Alriskian enforcement officers - despite the high risks in doing so.

"Confirmed, *Adventurous Valor*. We will proceed to ALP 308-TL7. Confirm."

"I'd like to know why this is necessary," Cash protested, trying to keep his tone neutral. "I have an important shipment of potentially radioactive materials and would prefer my ship remain intact to perform the delivery."

"*Adventurous Valor*, you've been flagged as potentially dangerous by the Rastic authorities. An unauthorized landing and takeoff in the Desolate Regions, and you're wanted for questioning in the matter of an explosion in those regions."

"I needed to pick up a client," Cash explained, bluffing. "I dropped them off on" - he hesitated for less than a second as he tried to remember planets that had been along his course - "Cyiyll, a couple hours ago."

As he explained, he tapped a couple keys on the keyboard hovering in the air above his console, falsifying logs that would prove his story.

"Please send over logs for proof, *Adventurous Valor*." The voice on the other end of the comm had disbelief laced in it, Cash could tell.

"Sending now. Pardon the wait, my transmitter doesn't take well to log-maps."

"Plain text will do fine, *Adventurous Valor*. No wait is required."

"Understood, sending now," Cash said, tapping the button to backdate the logs to the proper time and sending the logs.

The other end of the comm was silent for a good two minutes. Then, it crackled to life again.

"Your logs check out, *Adventurous Valor*. We still need to clear important information."

"Fire away. Actually, don't fire - that's just an expression," Cash said.

"Understood," the voice said cynically. "What of the explosion of an abandoned military complex in the Rastic Desolate Regions?"

"Oh, it was abandoned?" Cash said, then cursed himself for saying that and almost blowing it. He continued to bluff his way through, laying on the smooth talk and hoping the comm unit didn't betray his nervousness. "One of the radioactive crates was becoming unstable. I had to leave it and as I was flying off, it blew and hit a fuel line, I think. I had refueled at a station there."

"You will be fined for the destruction of the complex," the enforcer replied after a lengthy pause. "Refueling there with a selection of radioactive materials was an irresponsible decision. We are detracting from your account now. Please give your name."

Cash pulled up the identity he had associated with the ship. Myr Sanja, the sand sampler, he thought with a grin. "Name's Myr Sanja. I do geological work."

"Confirmed, Myr Sanja. Detracting two thousand units for your incompetency."

Cash winced. Two thousand was a bad fine. Even for a place in such bad condition and for his "irresponsible actions", two thousand was still a lot.

"Understood," he said, trying to sound humbled.

"Please be more careful in the future. Further fines and potential jail time will be imposed for future irresponsible actions."

"Sure," Cash said. "Am I, uh, cleared to proceed now?"

"Affirmative. Fly safely, *Adventurous Valor*."

The ships fell away and Cash turned on the engines to seventy percent capacity. He shot off into space, away from the Alriskians, and began his approach to Quallop.