

Chapter 6

Lukas was unsure how long he'd slept. He didn't dream, hadn't since the modifications. Initially, he worried if they'd somehow disconnected his soul. If natural sleep was filled with color and meaning, and his was only darkness, would death be the same? He'd long since put it out of his mind.

A tickling, bell-like sound caused the warm mass beside him to shift and slide away.

“Hello?”

Beth's elevated skin temperature faded in the cool air.

“Yes, I understand.” She listened for a moment. “No, I didn't think that.” A pause.

“Yes, I do.”

She set the hand piece down and looked over her shoulder at him. In her silent stare, he understood that she couldn't see him in the darkness.

“Who was that?”

She inhaled quickly, her hand going to her heart.

“Didn't think I was awake?”

“No.”

“What was the call?”

“He said I have to start work today.”

“Who?”

“The one you came in with last night.”

“Royer.”

She nodded in the darkness. He could see her expression hardening against her future.

She looked cold and pitiful standing nude in the darkness.

“Come back to bed.”

She stepped back. “He said I should be ready for clients in one hour. You have to go.”

“We’ll see about that.” Lukas shoved the blankets aside, stood, and dressed quickly.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, her tone unsure.

“Don’t worry. If I get someone in trouble, it’ll be me.”

He made his way down the hallway to find the large room empty, the panels in the wall cold, no apparent need for security so early in the morning. Shoving open the smoked-chrome doors, he found no one in the passage. He heard the faint scrape of a playing card on felt and walked toward it.

Approaching a large, open area, he found himself on the balcony over the casino. Below, only gray-haired men sat at the few open tables. While on the Aries Four, he’d heard of men like this; those who, either lacking a desire to return to the civilized world or not having enough years left to get there, had chosen to live out their days and pensions here.

From what he’d seen of it, Lukas would rather die in a closet than on Ignis Aeri.

Descending the stairs, he checked himself from walking too quickly as he crossed the casino floor and passed into the café where he found Royer sitting before a plate of what looked like scrambled soy protein.

Royer looked up. A corner of his mouth lifted in a wry half-smile. “Have a good night?”

“Yes, so good I’ve decided I’ll fight for you.”

A callous smile drew across his face. “Really? Duly noted. I’ll have to experience her talents. I had a hunch about her.”

“Not if you want me to fight.”

Royer’s brow knitted.

“I have one condition.”

Royer’s voice lowered. “Which is?”

“She remains untouched.”

Royer’s expression darkened as his pulse increased from 75 bpm to 112.

“That is completely unacceptable.”

“Why?”

“Do you have any idea how much she’ll make us even in one week?”

The comment caused Lukas’ anger to flare, but he quelled it, saying, “It could be valuable to you.”

Royer’s eyes went flat. “How?”

Lukas looked to the security guards. They had their full attention on him.

When he looked back to Royer, Royer leaned back and laughed. “You don’t wish to speak of it openly? There’s nothing to keep from them. If I can’t share it with Rashomon, I don’t think it.”

Lukas leaned forward, “Just hear me out.” He stood up. “Alley beside the main cafeteria.” It was the only somewhat private area Lukas knew.

“No.”

Lukas shrugged and left.

He stepped out under the swirling sky with only perhaps forty-five minutes until Beth was to be put into service. He could only hope Royer had been interested enough to follow him. He fought the urge to look back as he found his way through the deserted, gravel streets to the cafeteria. Chains hung across the rusted doors. He went down the side alley, to where the old man's vomit still lay spattered across the gravel.

Staying clear of it, he leaned against the wall and waited. If Royer didn't come, he'd gambled and lost, lost for Beth really.

"Shit," he grumbled in frustration. He'd come for his sister but already felt the desolate planet's claws in his back. Saving one girl would be a feat in itself, now he had invested himself in saving two, which should be impossible.

Years before, he'd made a living from the impossible.

He rubbed his neck where the pain of having his submission unit shorted out with a soldering iron in the back streets of San Paolo still troubled him ten years later. The kid he'd paid in food vouchers was probably long dead. He looked up to the sky and wondered if they'd tracked him. He'd done his best to leave no trace.

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The old Russian woman, cane in hand, approached the chromed double doors set into the only building not made from welded shipping containers. It was the pale side of a massive ship, the Aeris One, the first ship from the Veritas Corporation, which was permanently anchored here, serving as living quarters and offices for the corporate elite.

The doors slipped to the side. Entering a lobby filled with quiet music and the scent of lilacs, she touched the mass of purple flowers hanging from the pot beside her. Artificial silk petals.

“Interesting,” she said, looking to the office layout on the wall. Showing her identification to the security personnel, she boarded the elevator, exiting at the top floor. Walking down a long, richly carpeted hallway, she came to stand before a wide, crystal faced door. It opened.

As she walked into the waiting room, a receptionist, perhaps in her early thirties, asked in a professionally cold tone, “May I help you?”

The woman had long, blue-black hair, a large chest, and thin waist, just the kind of woman he’d want in his front office. Iskra wondered how much trouble he’d been to her. Probably a great deal.

She walked up to the beautiful woman, her weight pressing into her cane more for show than support.

“I must,” she said, letting her accent deepen, “speak with Mr. Barstad.”

The woman scowled, and Iskra could see her thoughts forming. What would this old woman need with him? What was the crone even doing on Ignis Aeri?

The woman, to her credit, offered a warm smile, saying, “Do you have an appointment?”

Iskra shook her head. “I need no appointment.”

The receptionist scowled. “Ma’am I am sorry, but you must—”

“Tell him,” Iskra said, holding up a crooked finger, the ring on it once worn by a long-dead queen, “someone is here he *must* speak with. Tell him—”

The woman cut her off. “I will do *no* such thing. Without an appointment, you will *not* go through those doors.”

Iskra smiled. “Of course.” She let out a sigh and, leaning into the desk, spoke in a confidential tone. “It would be a shame if someone were to make your mid-day... *frolics* public would it not?”

The woman’s expression darkened as she fairly hissed, “How *dare* you.”

“You, my sweet,” Iskra said in her grandmotherly tone, glad her gamble had paid dividends, “should only concern yourself with the fact that I do dare it.”

The woman’s lips pressed to nothing as her face flushed. “I’ll tell him you threatened me, threatened him.”

Iskra waved the comment away. “That will be of no use my dear.” She pointed to the richly grained doors to the woman’s right. “He is through there, yes?”

“He is... but—”

Iskra held up a hand to silence the pretty thing and, moving around the desk, approached the door. Nothing happened. She looked back to the woman, raised an eyebrow to her, and tapped the surface of the door with her fingernail.

Glaring at Iskra, the woman put in an earpiece and pressed her long-nailed index finger to the desk’s surface, illuminating a square beneath it.

“Mr. Barstad, an *old* woman is here to see you.” She glared at Iskra. “She does not have an appointment.”

She paused, listening.

“Yes sir, I would but—”

She fell silent again.

“I know, however—”

While unable to make out words, Iskra could hear the tones of Jorgen’s anger through the earpiece.

“I know that,” the woman seethed, “but she threatened to expose *us*.”

She listened, but apparently hearing nothing from the other end asked, “Are you there?”

After a moment, her eyes shifted to Iskra. “She looks... raggedy.”

She put her finger to her earpiece. “What’s that?” ... “She’s Russian or something. Eastern European anyway.” She listened again, her eyes going wide. “No... I didn’t tell her anything.” She looked to Iskra, eyes now worried. “Yes, okay.” She pulled the earpiece out.

Iskra smiled at her. “My ancestors actually come from Northern Asia.”

“Yes, ma’am. I apologize for my tone ma’am. He’ll see you.”

The door thumped and slid aside.

Iskra bowed her head to the woman, and as she walked through the doorway, her footfalls went silent on the pure-white carpeting. Rich mahogany panels covered the walls, as lamps with deep-blue, cut-glass shades threw bladed patterns across the ceiling.

Jorgen Barstad came from around a corner, his eyes uncharacteristically tentative. When he saw her, he asked with careful words, “How did you get here?”

“Such a stupid question, my son. I did not fly on a broom.”

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“You better make this good and make it quick.”

Lukas turned to find Royer standing beside the dumpster with his arms crossed, biceps flexing.

Lukas flushed with the possibility of helping Beth despite the odds. “That depends.”

“I can’t give you what you want.”

“You mean you won’t.”

Royer’s eyes glowed with anger. “I have no cause to.”

“If anyone touches the girl, you’ll give up the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“I don’t need the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Lukas shrugged. “Every man needs something. If you needed nothing,” he patted the corrugated side of the building he leaned on, “you wouldn’t be living here.”

Royer stared at him.

“I can drop your man Crack whenever and however you’d like.”

Shaking his head, Royer said, “I knew you were wasting my time. Rashomon doesn’t fix his fights. Even if he did, you can’t possibly guarantee that facing Crack.”

“I can.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Let her be for one day while I fight. If I lose, you can do what you like with her.”

“I can do what I like with her now.”

“Without consequence?”

Royer nodded slowly. “Mr. Barrineau, you may be very confident in your abilities, but you have no idea—”

Lukas held up a finger to silence him and stepped forward. Royer uncrossed his arms, not allowing himself to be backed down.

Lukas said, “I understand that Rashomon doesn’t fix fights. I admire that, but what if Crack were to lose at precisely 1 minute into the second round, say with an Ezekiel Choke? Someone who knew that might profit a bit.”

Royer’s face flushed, but it wasn’t in anger this time.

“I want Cassandra untouched. I need someone like you to sell that to Rashomon. If you do,” he tapped Royer on the sternum, “I can help you make some credits. If not, I walk and you miss a wonderful opportunity.”

Royer smacked Lukas’ hand aside. “I’m loyal to Rashomon. I won’t—”

“I’m not questioning your loyalty. I can finish the fight when I choose. Me telling you when and how isn’t disloyal. If you choose to bet or not, or have someone else do it, is beyond me.”

Royer remained silent, his eyes shifting from Lukas’ face to the street and back.

Lukas said, “A fight is only fixed by someone laying down. Winning when I chose and how I choose is different.”

Royer’s eyes went to the street. “You have no idea who Crack is, and yet you’re so confident.”

“I am.”

Royer’s lips compressed as he looked at Lukas as though he’d like to kill him. “I’ll get you a fight this afternoon. If you beat the contender I set you against at exactly the time and method in the match you predict, I might see about pulling Cassandra. However, until you prove yourself, Cassandra will be working regular hours. If you want, you can have her at night.”

Lukas took hold of Royer’s black shirt, pulling him close. “Allow me to add to our bargain.”

Royer, more muscular than Lukas, gripped Lukas' arm as though to fight him off, but the arm proved immovable. Royer's expression became worried as he shoved on the arm.

Lukas said, "If she's touched, you die."

With the tip of his free finger, Lukas traced a crease into the dumpster, the quarter-inch-thick metal screeching. He touched the finger to Royer's forehead. "Do you know how much pressure it takes to puncture the frontal bone of the human skull?"

Royer's eyes crossed almost comically as he stared at Luka's finger. He shook his head.

Letting go of Royer, Lukas shrugged. "Not much. I don't share my women, Royer. If she works even one client, no money... and no living."

Traces of sweat beaded on Royer's forehead near the hairline. "You're Sanctuary Guard?"

"So says you," Lukas said. "I say I'm a man looking for a new life. You want to be on my side of it?"

Royer stared at Lukas as though, if he took his eyes off him for a second, he'd attack him.

"I'll give you one fight to prove it," his heart rate was cresting, but Lukas needed no hardware to hear the worry in his voice, "but I'll have to tell Rashomon she's sick to keep her out of circulation."

"Whatever you need to do is fine."

Royer shook his head. "No, it isn't. Rashomon sees through everyone. You have no deal with me. She's simply sick. If you try and say otherwise," he smoothed the fabric of his shirt as his voice stabilized, "I'll have you killed if I have to dump a vat of acid on your freak head."

Lukas smiled, "Thanks."

“I don’t want your thanks.” He looked over his shoulder and turned back as though commiserating with Lukas. “What will you do if they come for you?”

“Kill them.”

Royer shook his head. “That’s impossible.”

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Question 1: Does Royer keep his bargain or betray Lukas?

Question 2: (This is a special one, as I won’t tell you the voting outcome until the end of the novel) Is Iskra good or bad?