

Chapter 4

As Lukas walked among row after row of shipping containers, he found New Bingham to be nothing but a shanty town of miners' shelters. All the while, the sky swirled over the warping sun as it descended toward the horizon. As he walked, he found himself thinking about the border sergeant. Lukas felt the overweight man's finger on him, and that angered him. Approaching a dented barrel, its inner rim charred with soot, he took out his ID card and touched the cross-hatched disk melted into its surface. While throwing it into the barrel would free him from Sergeant Gret's net, being detained for not having ID would be, he assumed, worse. At the moment, his location meant nothing. At some point, however, it might be necessary to take the risk of no longer having the ID. Perhaps he could find a way of destroying the disk.

His rumbling stomach pulled him from his thoughts. Pocketing the card, he scanned the low structures. A white stick figure with long hair and comically large breasts had been scratched into the wall across the street. Beside it, in uneven letters, read, *Veritas gave me the clap.*

As evening came on, the streets grew crowded with men wearing filthy coveralls, their eyes bright against the dark-red soil imbedded in their skin. They gathered at the entrances to the shelters, talking in hushed tones and playing cards on barrel heads.

Ignis Aeri seemed a place without hope or joy.

As he passed a group of men, sitting on stools repurposed from mine cart wheels, one of the men threw his cards at another. Lukas slowed. Two Veritas guards walked along the far side of the gravel walkway. Now and again, the nearer guard's flat-black baton arced with blue bolts.

The second card player, leapt at the first, knocking him into the wall with a skull-cracking thud.

With nothing more than a glance at the men, the guards continued down the street. When one guard caught Lukas' gaze, his eyes narrowed. Lukas imagined he, a clean-faced man not wearing the standard, duck-canvas coveralls, stood out. He walked on.

Turning a corner, he saw a large, low structure of joined containers with a line of men at the door. From inside, the clatter and clink of dishes accompanied hundreds of voices—a cafeteria. Several men gave Lukas suspicious looks as he joined them in line. As the line moved forward, he entered the open door. Inside men sat at long tables on circular chrome seats mounted to the table frames by tubular steel. Caged overhead lamps lit the space with white-blue light. The men shoveled spoonfuls of lumpy, gray stew into their mouths and drank from plastic cups scuffed to an opaque white. With all available seats occupied, as one man stood, a guard allowed another, standing with his tray of food, to sit.

The man in line ahead of Lukas pressed his thumb to a scanner, and a worker with heavy stubble and one eye bright-red with broken blood vessels waved him by. The worker's name badge read *Baskov*.

Lukas pressed his thumb to the scanner. It pulsed red.

Looking up, Baskov said in a heavy, eastern-bloc accent. "What is problem?"

Lukas smiled, and feeling that the expression was incongruous to his surroundings, let his face go slack as he said, “I don’t know. I have credits in my account.”

The sides of Baskov’s bristled jaw flexed. “You are new.”

“Yes, arrived today.”

“They should have entered you in system. You must go to office to find what is wrong. They are closed for night though.” At that, a nasty smile drew across the guard’s bear-like face.

“I understand. Can I pay with credits until I can get things sorted out?”

His smile vanished. “No. No Commonwealth credits are processed here, only Veritas meal vouchers... only for *registered* employees. Go to office in morning. But you will be working in morning. When you have time to fix,” he shrugged and leaned forward, “I do not care. Now go. You hold up my line.”

Lukas nodded and walked away angered for those who’d hung thirty years of their lives on Ignis Aeri. If he’d come here to mine, he’d probably be coming to the realization that he’d made a mistake that couldn’t be undone.

As he walked past the alley at the side of the cafeteria, he heard an old man’s voice, frail and pleading, say, “...didn’t *do* anything, please.”

A soft-tissue thump was followed by retching and a splattering wetness.

Head-high containers halfway down the alley blocked Lukas’ view.

“Now you have’ta lose some teeth Potts.”

No guards walked along the street, not that they apparently would have cared. None of the men walking past him, who must surely have heard the scuffle, did either. Lukas shouldn’t have let himself care, but with a heavy sigh, he walked down the alley.

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Lying on a bed in the Veritas Emergency Medical Facility, Morse Gret clutched his chest feeling sure he was dying. His breath came in short huffs. A nurse pulled his hand aside and unbuttoned his shirt, exposing a pelt of graying hair across his fleshy chest. Using a flat device that emitted a deep-red light, she burned off a square of hair below his shoulder and attached a flexible, adhesive monitoring patch. Beyond the nurse's shoulder, Gret could see Royer leaning against the wall, arms crossed, eyes disinterested.

A rotund woman in a white lab coat, perhaps four foot ten, threw the curtain aside as she came into the area. Looking over the displays beside the bed, she said, "Mr. Gret, I am Doctor Sheckly." Her tone suggested she'd long since stopped caring about the human race.

"Why," Morse said through wheezing breaths, "can't I breathe?"

She touched a screen, which displayed a wire-frame outline of Morse's beating heart. "You have a 90 percent blockage in your right coronary artery and 95 percent in your left." She turned to Morse, her tone still mechanical. "I'm amazed you're breathing at all."

Looking over her shoulder to Royer, she said, as if she thought they were both wasting her time, "He'll live but will need a nanite purge of those vessels before we let him leave."

Royer pinched the bridge of his nose. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I don't kid." She held out a paper cup to Morse. "These will help."

Morse took the cup. Two miniscule, white tablets rattled in the bottom. Desperate to have the pain in his chest end, he threw them in his mouth. The doctor handed him a cup of water, which he drank.

She took hold of the curtain, "I'll get you in queue for surgery."

"How long will that take?" Royer asked.

The doctor shrugged. “That depends on the procedures before him.” She eyed Royer harshly. “You work at the Yoshiwara, yes?”

Royer nodded.

“Disgusting.” She left the curtain hanging partially open as she left.

With the curtain partially open, he could see two other patients’ beds. One man’s face was bandaged and the other had a doctor stitching a long cut on his arm. Both men wore filthy work coveralls. Veritas used men like the drill bits, grinding them down before throwing them aside. To the doctor, Rashomon, Royer, and even Veritas, he was also a simple means to an end, which angered him. He was not a tool to be ground down and thrown aside. He’d once been a company man through and through. When he’d first arrived, Veritas held the promise of wealth, a career to the top. But no one had given him the opportunities he deserved. Men like Rashomon and Jorgen Barstad had taken everything from him. All that remained of Morse Gret was an old, fat fool living out the remaining years of a wasted life.

“How do I find him?” Royer asked.

Morse was not going to lose the fighter. “I need to be with y—”

“I’m not going to waste the last part of my day pulling up your panties in this hole Gret. Tell me how to find the fighter.”

With a sigh, Morse dug in his pocket. Pulling out a display the size of his palm, he touched its screen and said, “He’s got a transmitter on his ID card. As long as he still has it on him,” he handed the display to Royer, “he’s near the canteen.”

Looking at the display, Royer asked, “What’d you say his name was?”

“His identification said he was Zak Barrineau.”

“Not his real name?”

“Of course it isn’t his real name.”

“Watch your tone Gret. I’ve wasted enough time on you already today.”

Morse’s anger broke on his fear of Royer, and he nodded as he tucked his hatred away.

Royer said, “I’m going to hunt this punk down and get him in the ring.”

As Royer left, Morse called after him, “If he wins, I want my—” but the clenching pain in his chest stopped him short.

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As Lukas moved down the alley, he saw it dead-ended at a corrugated wall with a door grinder-cut into it. The door’s hasp had a padlock through it. As he came around the containers, he found two men, one with a broad back and the other shorter with narrow shoulders. They stood over an old man, who sat with his back against the side wall of the alley, his hands held up defensively.

The old man spoke in a pained voice, “I didn’t mean to... whatever I did please... stop.” His pitiful appearance was accentuated by the tangy scent of vomit.

The larger man wore a quilted welder’s cap with the short brim close over his deep-set eyes. He kicked the side of the man’s thin leg, his boot making a heavy whumping sound. The old man yelled out, spittle spraying from his thin lips. He gripped his thigh.

“Please, leave me be... please.”

In his short career, Lukas had dealt with a lot of unruly men, and he’d found that there were those who had a reason, and those who did not, the latter often being the more dangerous. While he’d prefer to have a few more seconds to observe the men to discover their purpose, another kick like that in the wrong place could kill the old man.

“Is there a problem gentlemen?”

The shorter man, turned with a start. “What the hell?” His thinning hair had the sheen of a grease trap.

The bigger man looked over his shoulder slowly, as if unconcerned.

With a quick glance at the larger man, the greasy haired man asked, “Who’re you?”

Lukas watched the men carefully. Were they drunk? Owed a debt? Insulted?

“Gentlemen, I don’t like to see an old man hurt like that. While I’m sure you have your reasons, I’d like to help stop this.”

The bigger man crossed his arms. “Get out.”

“I don’t want any trouble,” Lukas said raising his hands, “but I’m not leaving.”

The smaller, greasy-haired man smiled, exposing a mouth of yellowed teeth rotted black and narrow at the bases.

Lukas nodded his chin to the old man. “What’d he do?”

The bigger man’s hands came away from his chest, balled into fists, knuckles whitening. “You don’t seem to listen too good.”

“He’s like Potts here,” the greasy-haired man said, “won’t shut up.”

If the old man owed them money, Lukas might have offered to pay his debt. But if he talked when he shouldn’t have, got them in some kind of heat, this was revenge, which would not be so easily mitigated.

“Let’s keep this easy guys,” Lukas said.

The bigger one walked up to him, and jammed his finger in Lukas’ chest. “What do you care about Potts?”

Lukas kept his hands up in deference. “I’m not looking for a fight.”

Taking a fistful of Lukas' coat lapel, the big man pulled him close. "Looks like you found—"

Lukas gripped behind the big man's elbow with his left hand and pulling, pinned the man's fist to his chest. Before the big man could react, he shoved his right hand into the man's wrist, collapsing it. Lukas pushed the man's arm to the left, the wrist now slipping into the gap of his armpit. He grabbed the man's elbow with both hands and hauled on it. As the man's hand and forearm slid into the small gap of Lukas' armpit wrist first, the tension in the wrist gave way as tendons tore out.

The man lifted his free fist to hit Lukas, but as the pain from his wrist reached him, his eyes went wide. Gripping his forearm, he fell to his knees screaming.

Lukas sidestepped him as he fell to the gravel. Looking to the smaller man, Lukas said, "I think it's you who should leave, *now*."

The man nodded, leapt over the bigger man, and ran. A man dressed in a plain black shirt and black slacks leaned on the wall at the entrance to the alley. The greasy-haired man ran past him and out of sight.

The big man let out deep animal howls, which might bring a lot of attention.

"Thank you so much," the old man said, as he pulled on a container near him to stand.

Lukas should have left then, but he felt badly for the pitiful old man and couldn't get himself to walk away without a word.

"What was that about?"

The old man shrugged, holding up his stick-thin arms. "I don't know. Stolio, grabbed me, dragged me down here, and started kicking the hell out of me."

“That Stolio?” Lukas asked, pointing to the big man, who’s now lay on his side moaning.

The old man nodded.

Something in the old man’s expression caused Lukas doubt.

“You sure there wasn’t some other reason for the attack?”

The old man gave a thin laugh, saying, “I didn’t catch your name.”

“I didn’t offer it.”

With a shrug, the old man said, “Suit yourself.”

As he passed the man in black, the man said, “So we have ourselves a moral man on Ignis Aeri. I was wondering when we’d get one.”

“Leave me be, Royer. I don’t owe you and yours nothin’ right now.”

“I’m not here to talk to you Potts, now get out of here.”

The old man looked back to Lukas with regret, as if he wished he could be of some help before walking out of sight.

When Lukas’ eyes met the man in black’s, the man pushed off the wall and squared off as though he intended to block Lukas’ exit. His expression remained calm.

When the man crossed his arms, the fabric stretched over his biceps and forearms. He touched his chest. “Name’s Royer.”

“I gleaned. What do you want?”

“To help you.”

Lukas watched the man’s expression carefully. This was not a simple street thug. “To what end?”

“To earn some credits.”

Lukas walked toward Royer. “I don’t need credits.”

As he stepped around Royer, Royer held out a hand, elbow down and bent, protected from hyper-extension.

Royer said, “When I tell you that I don’t want to get into it with you, I’m not being modest. After what I just saw, I *don’t* want to get into it with you.”

“Then let me pass.”

“In a moment.”

“Now.”

“What about women? I can get you as many as you can handle. Beautiful girls.”

“No.”

Royer gave him a knowing smile. “Boys then.”

Lukas shook his head. “No. Absolutely not...” He stepped around Royer’s hand and walked into the street.

“If you walk away, I tell the Veritas guards that you tore a man’s hand off without provocation.”

Lukas stopped. “That’s not how it went down.”

Royer smiled wryly. “And who will care? He’s an asset to them, an asset you’ve damaged. Now,” he walked up to Lukas, “let’s talk about what you *do* want.”

“No. We’re done talking.”

“Why?”

The sincerity of Royer’s tone caught Lukas off guard.

Royer said, “I know you’re not supposed to be here.”

Lukas said nothing.

“What do you want from Ignis Aeri?”

Lukas stared at him.

Royer laughed. “Okay. No problem chief. I get it, but I need your help, and you, I’m guessing need a meal and a place to sleep. Unless you’re a guest of Veritas, the only place for either is with my employer.”

That caused Lukas to think of the old woman. How had she planned on surviving here?

“Here’s the deal. I have a fighter needs a challenge, and you clearly have the skills I need to challenge him.”

“I don’t fight for money.”

“What about for food? A safe place to sleep? At least come take a *look* at the girls. You can’t turn them down until you’ve seen them... and then you won’t be able to turn them down.”

Lukas remained silent.

“I represent a man named Rashomon, an important man on Ignis Aeri.”

Lukas suppressed his reaction to the name.

Royer continued, “He runs an entertainment establishment here in town known as the Yoshiwara.”

“After the Yoshiwara district in Japan?”

Royer’s eyebrows rose. “An educated man as well. Excellent.”

In as dispassionate a tone as he could muster, Lukas asked, “What kind of women do you have?”

Royer clapped Lukas on the shoulder. “Any kind you would want. We have blonde, brunette, young, old—”

“How young?”

Royer’s smile turned knowing. “Eighteen is the legal limit on working girls, and we have several that age. Some are still quite... inexperienced if you prefer that.”

“What might I get in return for fighting?”

“More than enough. Let’s discuss terms as we walk.”

“I didn’t say I *would* fight.”

“Any man who asks to hear terms has his price. We’ll be able to meet yours.”

“Are you sure?”

A broad smile broke out across Royer’s face. “Definitely. Now walk with me. It’s getting late, and we have to get you settled in a nice room. I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Walking alongside Royer, Lukas thought of Aspen, who would turn nineteen next month.

Question: Does Lukas interact directly with Rashomon in the next scene or does Rashomon stay ‘behind the curtain’ until the fight?