

Burning Sky

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Chapter 3

The staircase ended at broad wooden doors. Morse Gret had never before seen wooden doors on Ignis Aeri. The deep grain glowed under thick, clear polyurethane, giving the wood the glistening appearance of being suspended under water. The fittings of the door appeared to be brass, but richer and brighter. They couldn't be... gold?

Royer tapped the knuckle of his index finger on the door quietly and stood listening. He tapped again. Nothing.

“He may have moved into the bedroom,” Royer said. “If so, we won't disturb him.”

Morse's uneasiness rose. He should have been turned away today. Rashomon did not meet with people in his private chambers. Something felt wrong, and Morse jumped at the chance to leave the situation. “I'd be glad to come back another time.” He'd rather lose the fighter than enter the chamber.

Royer shrugged. As the two men turned to descend the staircase, a loud clack sounded within the doors. They drew open in absolute silence, exposing a wide hallway filled with the echoing of falling water. Red-stained pillars, which appeared to be hand-hewn logs, framed a pathway of pale, high-gloss wood. On either side of the wooden path, white sand with curving rake lines, like still-frame ripples in a pond, covered the floor. The walls and ceiling showed no

exposed metal as the rest of the Yoshiwara did but a framework of the same rich, lacquered wood of the doors. Within the framing of the wood, white sheeting, luminescent as if made from silk, glowed with a subdued light. This hallway seemed an impossibility to Morse given the cost of bringing materials to Ignis Aeri. A small bunk mattress could cost a man six months' salary, which is why most miners found themselves bereft as they stepped foot on Earth with thirty years of their lives gone.

Royer coughed. Morse looked to him. He'd removed his shoes and replaced them with paper slippers. Morse did as Royer had, embarrassed by his boots' scarred leather. After setting his boots on the rack beside Royer's, he did his best to balance on one foot. He could not, so Royer held his shoulder as he slid the paper bootie over his acrid-scented black socks.

As Royer stepped out onto the polished surface of the floor, squeaking chirps sounded out. They walked along the pathway, each footfall chirping like small birds.

Royer spoke in a quiet tone, "The floor is *uguisubari*, a nightingale floor. A traditional security feature, but still effective."

Morse wondered at the effectiveness of a floor, which could simply be walked around along the white sand, but assumed there were other security features. However, he saw no cameras or other exposed security devices.

When the hallway turned to the right, it appeared to continue on, again turning right, but a reflection of Morse and Royer stood at the second bend. A wall of smoky, mirrored glass created the illusion.

"One way mirror?" Morse asked.

"Exactly," Royer said.

Walking up to the glass, he held his index finger and thumb up, swept them downward, and closed his fist. Morse understood this to be some form of handsignal, which Rashomon, or whomever might be on the other side of the glass would understand.

Royer nodded, seeming to have heard something over his earpiece. He walked around behind Morse. “Hands out, legs spread.”

Morse watched in the mirror as Royer’s hands patted across his hips, down his legs, and up the insides. The hands squeezed his pockets before coming up under his armpits, patting his chest. In the mirror, Morse appeared to have two sets of arms.

“Turn,” Royer said.

Morse did, and Royer slapped his back and butt down before turning Morse’s to face the glass.

The glass appeared to go liquid as it lifted upward. As Rashomon’s personal chamber came into view, Morse wondered how many had actually seen it and worried again why he was allowed to do so.

Natural-toned tatami mats covered the floor, each mat separated by a thin frame of the red wood. As the glass lifted fully, Morse saw a set of dark, deeply pillowed couches in a semi-circle in the center of the room. At the center of the arc of cushions, Rashomon sat on a bare seat, which appearing to be made from fine bamboo, stood like a simple throne. Morse swallowed hard when he saw Medea sitting draped along the couch beside Rashomon. Orb shaped paper lanterns, hooked on head-high, iron stands, lit the area with a wavering light as if from candles. Above the seating area, the ceiling, which should have been no more than three shipping containers high, appeared infinite as stars shimmered and twinkled as they would on Earth.

To complete the illusion of a courtyard at night, the exterior walls of structures with downward sloping, red-tiled eaves had been built into the sides of the chamber.

As he followed Royer down the short path to the couches, a breeze scented with pine and the ocean brushed at Morse, causing his nervous heart to slow somewhat. When he heard crickets chirping from small wooden cages hanging from the eaves of the buildings, he stopped in amazement.

“One has to keep,” Rashomon said in his unnaturally deep voice, “the temperature of the room just right for them to sing.”

Hearing a thump behind him, Morse turned to find the glass had descended again. Beyond it he could see the hallway for a moment before the glass darkened. A virtual image of a gravel pathway leading off into dense forest became visible. Beyond the forest stood the unmistakable peak of Mt. Fuji.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” Rashomon said.

Rashomon’s heavy eyebrows and the folded skin above the bridge of his nose formed a permanent scowl. His bold, dark eyes and strong jaw, intensified by a gray-laced beard and full mustache, gave him an august quality.

Morse willed himself to keep his gaze away from Medea, but with his eyes on Rashomon, he could see her pale, bare ankle and the arc of her calf to her knee where a green, silken robe lay draped over her thigh.

“Mr. Gret,” Rashomon said, holding his gaze, “I am told you have a proposal for me.”

Rashomon’s dark irises filled most of his eyes, giving Morse the feeling he was looking into deep wells of black water. Morse broke eye contact, and in a moment of instinct, his gaze

flicked to Medea. He looked back to Rashomon, but her image, as though he'd seen it in a flash of lightning, remained burned in his mind's eye.

She lay propped up on one elbow, her silken, red hair, cascading over a delicate, pale shoulder.

Royer nudged him. Both he and Rashomon looked impatient.

"I have..." he said, fighting the urge to look at her again.

Rashomon stood. He wore an efficiently tailored, opal-hued shirt with a short collar buttoned to his throat and sleeves which fully covered his wrists. The fabric shifted in liquid hues as he approached. The rough folds of his traditional hakama shuffled like dry grass. While he stood a few inches shorter than Morse, his muscular shoulders and flat stomach gave evidence to uncommon strength for his perhaps sixty years.

Rashomon brought with him a faint cherry and bark scent reminiscent of a fine cigar. Morse hadn't so much as seen a cigar in years. As Rashomon looked down to Morse's shirt, taunt across his belly, Morse felt as though all his weaknesses were exposed. Rashomon's eyes rose to meet his, so black as if to suggest an empty vessel.

"Mr. Gret, you are a pitiful excuse for a man."

Rashomon paused as if Morse should speak, but Morse had no idea how to respond.

"I do not respect weakness, Mr. Gret." He turned with a smooth motion and walked back to the bamboo seat. With his back turned, Morse—as if proving Rashomon correct—stole a glance at Medea. His heart raced in his chest as his gaze traced over the curves of her body to her face. She stared at him with dark-jade eyes that fairly glowed. Their almond shape afforded a cat like humor to her expression, but her full lips, set over a slightly long chin, held no smile. Her red hair, with natural hints of blonde, hovered in a delicate arc over her right eye, curling to

touch her cheek. There, light freckles ran over the bridge of her straight, if not slightly long nose. The elements of her face, while not traditionally perfect, came together into a beauty Morse could not tear himself away from.

“Mr. Gret,” Rashomon said, displeasure tinting his voice.

Morse could not tell if what he saw in her eyes was sadness or...

“Mr. Gret,” Rashomon said, his tone darkening.

He willed himself to look away from her, locking his eyes on Rashomon’s.

“You are wasting my time, Mr. Gret, and I will not abide that. Speak *now*.”

“I have a fighter, sir,” Morse said, nearly spitting the words out. “He came through customs today. He’s not an employee. He had falsified I.D.”

“Why should I take interest?”

“He looks to be a good fighter, sir.”

“Looks to be.”

“Yes, sir,” Morse felt his eyes being drawn back to the pale leg beside Rashomon. He kept his eyes locked on those dark wells. “He had a confidence and a bearing about him that—”

“A what?” Rashomon interrupted.

“A confidence and a bear—”

“Allow me to understand what you are expressing to me.” He stood and walked to Morse again. “You have come to my Yoshiwara and invaded my personal space,” Morse’s attention was drawn to the out of focus shape of Medea in the corner of his vision and he fought himself to stay focused on Rashomon. “...to tell me that you have a good feeling about a man you have only seen once.”

Morse felt the danger of choosing his next words incorrectly. Men had been rumored to disappear from the Yoshiwara and be found the next day deep in a pit, having fallen bloodlessly to their deaths. “I—, sir, have a good read of people. He’ll fight well.”

One of Rashomon’s eyes narrowed. “Mr. Gret, how do you feel about risk?”

“I don’t care for it sir.” Morse felt a bead of sweat run down his face but let the cooling trail of moisture be.

“Then why do you take such a risk?”

“I’m sorry sir. I did not see that it was a risk. I had no intention of interrupt—”

“And yet you are here.” Rashomon fell silent, glaring at him.

Morse swallowed hard before saying, “Yes... sir.”

“I *am* in need of a good fighter, Mr. Gret. I do not fix my fights, and no one will wager against Mr. Falk.”

“Mr. Falk sir?”

“I believe the crowds call him *Crack*,” Rashomon’s expression narrowed as though the use of nicknames offended him deeply, “due to his penchant for breaking bones. His skill has put me in a position I do not care for. I cannot offer odds high enough to attract men to spend money on the fools I have been sent, a few of which *you* have sent me.”

Morse remembered the young miner who had been killed by Crack, his throat crushed.

“Yes, sir.”

“If I can find a fighter to face Mr. Falk, I stand to make a great deal of money. But so far there have been no contenders—not one.”

Morse nodded as, in the corner of his eye, he saw the blur which was Medea slide to an upright position and stand on long legs. He kept his eyes squarely on Rashomon's, swallowing again.

Medea walked behind Morse, dragging her fingertips across the back of his neck. Their coolness left a tingling path that glittered down his torso deep into his belly.

Rashomon, clearly aware of the impact Medea's presence had on Morse, smiled.

"If you look at her even once more Mr. Gret," Rashomon said, "I will have Royer cut your throat."

Morse's heartbeat crested, running so quickly in his old chest that he became lightheaded as a thick pain burned to life under the left side of his ribcage. He drew slow breaths, feeling like a fly in a spider's trap. Medea walked up behind Rashomon. Standing as tall as him, she rested her chin on Rashomon's shoulder.

Morse kept his eyes on Rashomon's, but Medea's slightly blurred features drew at him, his gaze feeling like boots on a tilted, icy ledge, ready to slip into a chasm at any moment.

"Mr. Rashomon, I meant no offense."

"Kuma," Medea said, a pout forming on her unfocused face, "don't be so harsh to him." The tone of her voice held the light smoothness of youth blended with a low music.

She moved from behind Rashomon to stand beside Morse. The warm touch of her hands settled on his shoulder. Morse caught the scent of lilacs.

Her voice tickling in his ear, she said, "He's only trying to make money."

Morse said nothing, unwilling to so much as acknowledge her presence.

When she spoke again, he felt her breath on his neck. "You aren't a bad man." Her soft lips pressed into his neck, and faded, leaving his skin cooling.

The pain in his chest increased, and his vision blurred slightly as he drew unsteady breaths. He felt as though he were going to die... killed by a kiss. He closed his eyes, and tried to slow his heart.

“Harlot,” Rashomon said in a growl.

Morse felt specks of warm spittle flick his face.

“Why do you defend him?”

Morse opened his eyes to find Rashomon’s eyes, luminous with anger, staring at Medea.

Her silken hair settled on Morse’s shoulder as her hand slid around his ample belly and patted it. “He’s like a little kitten, Kuma. Lost and frightened. Can we not keep him?” She giggled.

Morse had often had fantasies of meeting the beautiful Medea, and now, with her holding him, her soft hair on his cheek and neck, the scent of her causing his crotch to tighten, his terror held him petrified as though a monstrous spider had pricked him with its paralyzing venom and now held its limbs around him, adoring its prey before consuming it. A baser part of his mind, rebelling against all reason, did not want the embrace to end.

“What is the meaning of this!” Rashomon yelled.

Medea laughed aloud. Her head came away from Morse’s shoulder. “I only want to make you crazy, Kuma. I like you crazy.”

“Witch,” Rashomon yelled, “get out of my sight.”

As she ran past him, he swiped his open palm at her. She let out a small yell, bracing against the strike, but with fleet steps, she moved past him without his connecting.

“So slow Kuma,” she said with an easy laugh and walked around the couches and out of view around the corner of the mock courtyard building.

With a flush of terror, Morse realized he'd watched every curving motion of her long body as she'd left. His eyes locked back on Rashomon, and to his relief, he found him still staring at the place where Medea had disappeared. His chest rose and fell visibly as his breath whistled in his angled nose. His face was a deep, rage-red.

Morse stood perfectly still, as if Rashomon might forget he was in the room. Morse would be perfectly happy to forget Zak Barrineau, and he decided that he would never come to the Yoshiwara again... no more cards... no more girls.

Rashomon turned to him, his eyes wild. He stepped forward and planted the knuckles of his half-curved index and middle fingers on Morse's breastbone. "You take Royer and go find this fighter of yours. We'll put him in the oval. If he doesn't get through to the second round, I'll put you in with Darrin Falk. Understood?"

Morse felt as though a bear trap had just clamped down on his chest. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir."

Rashomon looked to Royer. "Get him out of here."

As Royer walked Morse out of the Yoshiwara, Morse's chest went tighter and tighter.

When they reached the street, Royer said, "Where can we find this fighter of yours?"

Feeling as though the ground tilted in a wide circle, Morse leaned against the Yoshiwara's corrugated metal wall. Gripping the fabric of his shirt over his heart, he said, "I think I need to go to the medical facility first."

With unmasked irritation, Royer said, "Fine." He took Morse by the arm and walked him into the street saying, "I warned you he was in a terrible mood."

Question: Do they try to convince Lukas to fight or simply force him to fight?