

Chapter 5

Lukas followed Royer toward a large structure. He assumed the monolithic building, which lay across an entire city block, was Rashomon's Yoshiwara. As they approached, two guards opened the ten-foot-high double doors. Following Royer through the metal-plate doors, Lukas found himself standing in a large, central chamber filled with the sounds of cards flipping, plastic chips clicking, and the clatter of a ball bearing settling into a roulette wheel. A hushed murmur came from the miners sitting at and milling among the tables.

As they passed the roulette table, Royer said, "the wheel is an air bearing assembly from a gold ore centrifuge." He had the proud tone of a man who'd taken part in the creation of something from the impossible. What he'd carved his living from, the lives of desperate men and vulnerable women, did not appear to trouble his sense of satisfaction.

Lukas searched the faces around the wheel and those beyond. His eyes tracked up the staircase welded into the left side wall, and back to the tables, where several men dressed as Royer was milled about keeping their eyes, not on the stakes, but on the miners.

He quelled the urge to ask how many plainclothes security Royer employed at a time. The desire rose, not from a need for information, but to unsettle Royer, which served no current purpose.

Royer looked to Lukas with a mixture of curiosity and humor. “Something troubling you?”

“No.”

“I never got your name.”

“Zak Barrineau, but I have a feeling you already knew that.”

“I know your assumed name, yes. I suppose you won’t share with me what your mother called you.”

Lukas remained silent.

With a shrug, Royer pointed to the back of the expansive space. “You can eat in the back. You are, of course, our guest.”

The lower portion of the back wall lay open to an area with a bar built into one side wall. Several four-seat tables covered the floor space. Tired men sat at the tables and women wearing sleek, white dresses with tight hems hugging halfway down curved thighs moved among them with drinks and plates of food. One of the women had a tired expression and a soiled handprint on her butt.

Royer pointed Lukas to a table and left the area, ascending the stairs. The table had been cut from the same corrugated metal of the shipping containers and stamped flat to make a smooth top. The bar appeared to have been constructed from an old conveyor belt bed, its rollers still underneath the metal surface of the bar. The bar back had once been a section of a huge machine. The center panels were hammered metal, polished to a mirror-like shine, warping the reflections of the men in the room.

A young woman approached with a steaming bowl and a cup of water. She pressed her hip into his shoulder as she leaned over him to set the cup and bowl in front of him. The bowl contained stew similar to what had been served at the cafeteria.

“We don’t usually get such handsome men in,” she said, touching his face with light fingers. “I’ll be in the lineup after nine if you’re up for it.” Her eyes held his for a moment before she walked away.

Taking up the spoon, he scooped a spoonful of potatoes and what looked like chunks of soy protein from the thick, gray broth and sniffed at it. He dipped his left thumb into the spoonful. The list of ingredients in the stew came up in his eye, or rather were transmitted directly into his visual cortex—no traces of poisons or other adverse agents. He wiped his thumb. As he began eating, he scanned the men in the room.

A man in the corner had a microscopic layer of sodium on his skin, still 34% hydrated. Traces in his exhalations indicated spent dopamine and prolactin. He’d recently engaged in intercourse. That angered Lukas. If Aspen was here, that man could have been with her. When he looked back to his stew, he found his spoon folded around his fingers.

Royer came down the stairs and approached.

Lukas straightened the spoon, recupping its bowl.

Royer sat. “Rashomon sends his regards.”

“I’d like to meet with him in person.”

“He has retired for the evening but asked me to assure you are comfortable.” He indicated the bowl. “I see that you’ve eaten. Good. Now for lodging and entertainment. Rashomon instructed me to offer you a selection from our elite girls. It would seem you’ve made quite an impression.”

“They say,” Lukas said in a flat tone, “never meet your heroes.”

Royer scowled at the comment.

Understanding that the average man would think Rashomon’s generosity marked his luckiest day, Lukas smiled and said, “Shall we?”

Royer rose and motioned for Lukas to follow him. As they walked among the dining tables, several men watched them go. Approaching a small door with a sign reading *NO ACCESS*, Royer touched the handle. A locking mechanism clicked, and he pushed the door open.

The doorway led into a narrow stairwell. A conduit led to a caged light on the wall and another up on the next landing. The cages threw crosshatched shadows down the steps. Lukas followed Royer up the stairs, their boots clanging off the diamond plate steps. On the second landing, Royer touched the handle of a door. The lock clacked.

Lukas followed him into a large, square room perhaps ten meters to a side. Deep-purple carpeting covered the floor, and on the far side were smoky-chromed double doors. Beside the doorway stood a stone sculpture of a fat fish with dragon-like eyes. It lay chin-down on a pedestal, its coiling tail lofted over its head, and spit a stream of water into a pool. Cool-blue light from within the pool wavered across the ceiling.

In the center of the room, two men, who looked as though they’d spent their entire day underground, reclined in the thick cushions of a crescent-shaped couch. They glanced from Royer and Lukas back to two doorways, draped with what seemed to be strings of stones which opalesced as the light hit them.

The room was vacant of security, but two panels by the draped doorways were warmer than the rest.

“Get out,” Royer said. “You’ll be invited back in a few moments.”

The two men, although visibly upset, left without argument.

When the door had closed, Royer indicated that Lukas should sit on the couch. Lukas walked to the couch and scanned its surface. It held only traces of dirt from the miners. The walls, covered with pale fabric, and the carpeting were equally clean. Everything appeared to be in a meticulous state of repair.

Lukas sat in the center of the couch, but did not lean backward. He kept his weight forward, attention focused on Royer, who moved to the side, just behind the couch, as a good retainer might. While he did not want to take his attention from Royer, he looked to the doors but still listened to Royer’s motions.

Royer said, “I want to emphasize, that our girls are important to us. Should one be damaged, you will be held accountable and will not be invited back. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Bring in the available girls,” Royer called out.

The stranded curtains sucked inward as doors beyond must have been drawn inward. The shadowy shapes of women approached, curved hips, long hair. Delicate fingers parted the curtains—long, dark-green nails, pale skin. The memory of Aspen’s pale skin caused his heart to rush. Could it be so easy? But as the draped strands moved aside, the face was not Aspen’s. More young women came out, all dressed in long, silken robes with elaborate silver and gold patterns stitched into the fabric. Some had dark skin, others pale, some Asian, others African. One tall woman had the high cheekbones and luminous eyes of a Native American. That woman’s gaze transfixed Lukas. She looked at him as a lioness might at prey, eyes locked, pupils so wide only a rim of bronze iris remained. While not smiling, she held a faint, curved

humor in her full lips. Lukas saw through her dangerous façade to her protected soul. She had made a game of taking control of men's hearts to shroud the truth of her situation. Underneath her makeup, nails and hair she was barely more than twenty years old and had been a prisoner for more than half her life.

In total, a dozen women now stood before him, each stunningly beautiful, some with full figures, others with narrow hips and delicate faces, long thin legs. The women opened their robes, hanging the fabric off their shoulders to expose tightly fitted silk dresses with short, neck-snug collars and slits up the thighs.

“Do not be afraid of having to choose only one,” Royer said. “You can have a different woman each night as long you win in the oval.”

At the mention of that, the Native American woman smiled, seeming to have found a compatriot in predation.

His eyes stopped on the second woman from the end. She was beautiful, but her face seemed so young. Her legs had the crosshatched redness of someone cold or frightened. While she stood with a sexual authority, one leg turned out and hips at an angle, he felt sure she held her hands on her hips to keep them from trembling.

Lukas knew all too well that a violent man, seeking to dominate, would pick her first.

Thinking of the two men who were about to come back into the room, he pointed to her and said, “I’ll take her.”

The girl's eyes widened in the half second before she gave him a hesitant, smile. Lukas had never seen a woman's face and eyes mismatch so greatly. The Native American shrugged her shoulders as if to say *your loss*. The other women left the room with the same slow strides, which heightened the motion of their hips. Clearly, they'd been trained to walk that way. Each

step, each smile was practiced. However, Lukas could see that the young woman with long coils of blond hair cascading over her shoulders was nothing more than scared to death.

Lukas looked back to Royer, who said, “Well chosen. She just came in today. You’ll be her first client.”

Lukas looked back to the girl. Her smile had faltered and she brought it back with an effort that made her look more ill than seductive. He recognized her as one of the girls he’d watched grow up on the Aeris 4. She’d been only eight when they’d left Earth, and he’d watched her run through the arboretum with a tooth missing. The other girls and the woman who’d chaperoned them had called her Cassandra. Now she stood before him, transformed from a girl in a jumpsuit with straight, bland hair to a... whore. In that smile Lukas wondered if she’d been prepared. Had she known on the Aeris 4 what she would become? Or had she only learned this morning? Lukas didn’t see any of the other girls from the ship and doubted they were all on the job so soon. He guessed that they could only be put into service when they were properly motivated to perform. Some would have stronger spirits than others.

Royer said, “Cassandra, please show Mr. Barrineau to your room and see to his every need.”

She tried to hold onto her smile as she swallowed hard.

As Lukas stood, Cassandra’s hands moved from her hips to her belly, not seeming to know where to go, like small animals trapped in a corner. A fat tear spilled from her eye and ran down her face.

“Cassandra—” Royer began in a strict tone.

“It’s all right,” Lukas said, holding up a hand. “It’s not a problem.”

Royer seemed doubtful as he said, “If she displeases you in any way, let a steward know.”

While Lukas had no intention of having any needs fulfilled, he nodded to Royer.

Cassandra had bolted her fear back down, but Lukas scanned her heart rate at 122 beats per minute. He felt sorry for her. To her credit, she smiled beautifully and came up to him, put a seductive arm around him, her hand icy cold on his arm, and walked him through the beaded curtain. Doors with silken padding and inlaid mother of pearl accents stood along the hallway. Most rooms were silent, but as Lukas passed, a cracking spank came through one followed by a woman’s shout. Lukas, of course wondered if Aspen were in any of the rooms.

Cassandra pushed open a door and entered a small room with a bed in the center and a dresser to the right. The ceiling had various eye bolts welded to it, as did the headboard of the bed. Cassandra, walked with swaying hips, which highlighted her curved body perfectly. As she turned, however, the terror in her eyes remained. Lukas hated to think what kind of man would be aroused by that look.

She drew herself halfway onto the bed, back arched. “What’s your name *honey*?” She drew out the last word as if it gave her physical pleasure to say it.

“Zak.”

“Zak,” she smiled. “What’s your fantasy?” Sliding back from the bed, she turned to the cabinet, and pulled it open. Inside Lukas saw several aids. He walked up to her, and she backed away. He pushed the cabinet shut.

He scanned the room. While there were no panels in the room with heat signatures, he did perceive a small reflective surface in one corner of the room, a tiny camera lens. He walked up to her. She backed away another step before he caught her, sliding his arms around her ribs,

hands on her back. Pulling her close, he felt the coolness of her skin and a slight tremble in her icy fingertips as they touched his neck. She pecked his neck with a kiss.

With his lips touching her ear, he whispered, “You’re safe with me. I only want information, but we’re on camera so we have to act as they’d expect. Take off your clothes and get into bed.”

She gave a slight nod, her chin pressing into his shoulder and pushed him away. Keeping her eyes on the floor, she turned from him and slipped her silk kimono from her shoulders. She untied her dress and let it fall exposing the perfect curve of her back, the smooth channel over her spine, and two dimples over round buttocks. With a swift, single motion, she lifted the sheet and slid into the bed. In that moment, Lukas regretted not having looked away from her, as though he had somehow violated her trust by not doing so.

He tapped the small, black panel beside the doorway, and the room fell into darkness. As the light faded from his eyes, the image of the room in ghosted-green rose up. The camera in the corner of the room glowed with a brilliant-green ring of IR light. To the girl the room would be pitch black. To Lukas it was simple to walk around the bed. He undressed, leaving his underwear on, and slid into bed beside her. Her hand touched his arm, fingers ice cold, trembling, then her palm, slightly clammy, tracked down his belly. He took hold of her hand.

Pulling her pillow onto his shoulder, he slid his arm under her neck and she moved close to him. The smooth warmth of her body settled next to his. He stroked the side of her face and gently kissed her forehead. “It’s all right,” he whispered, “I’m not going to do anything with you but talk.”

“They told me that if I get any complaints—”

“I won’t say a single negative word about you.”

She let out a breath, which washed across his chest. Her shoulder began shaking and after a moment, her inhalation tremored. In her ghosted green image, he could see tears dripping off the tip of her nose to fall on the pillow.

She whispered, “What am I going to do?”

He had no answer to that. He touched the side of her face. “How did you end up here?”

Rubbing the tears from her face she said, “They pulled me into a transport. I was walking to the corner store with my sister. She was six then... She’d be sixteen now. I probably wouldn’t even recognize her now.”

“How’d they get you through?”

“Through?”

“The port authority.”

“They told me they’d kill my family if I didn’t do as they said. I was only eight.”

When she began crying again, he said, “None of this is your fault.”

After a time, she sat up and reached for a tissue. She did not cover her breasts in the pitch black room. He looked away from her. When she lay down again, she put her arm around him, and the cool silk of her hair pressed into his ear and cheek.

“The woman who brought me aboard, Vera, had paperwork making her our legal guardian. We were all given different names and told how to talk with the agents.”

They lay for some time in silence, the bed now warmed with their combined heat. He asked her in a near-silent whisper, “I need to ask you some questions, but I have to trust you to not discuss what I’m asking with anyone.”

She nodded.

“This is very important.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

He paused as one might before jumping off a cliff into the sea. “I came here looking for my sister. She disappeared about a year before you did. Her name is Aspen Nordskov.”

She shrugged her shoulder under his hand. “I wouldn’t know. We were told to never tell our real name to anyone, the other girls... no one. I’ve gone by Cassandra longer than my real name.”

“I understand that. I’ve gone by Zak Barrineau for the last ten years.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Lukas.”

“Lukas Nordskov?”

“Yes.”

“Kind of a strange name.”

“Thanks,” he said with a slight laugh. “It’s Scandinavian.”

“You look Scandinavian.”

“Yes.”

“What does your sister look like?”

“I wouldn’t really know. I haven’t seen her since she was eight. She was pale, freckly. She had beautiful, red hair.” Now he laughed honestly. “The last time I saw her, she had hacked it short with kitchen shears. Our mother wanted it long, down to her waist. Aspen got mad at her over something and cut it off.”

As Cassandra laughed, she shifted, settling her breast against Lukas’ side. “A rebel.”

“Very much so...”

“If she’s been gone eleven years... that would make her about nineteen.”

“Next month. Do they always take them at eight?”

“Yes, they want them to be 18 when they arrive. I don’t understand it. They’re worried about us being legal to work, but don’t care that they’ve kidnapped us.” Her hand fumbled for his face in the darkness. Her fingers, now warm and no longer trembling, felt the sides of his nose, around his eyes, and across his lips.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-five. Aspen was a bit of a surprise for our parents. I was in high school when she was born.”

“Lucky girl. I wish I had a big brother to come save me.”

It was a risk, but Lukas decided to take it, “What’s your real name?”

Her lips and chin tightened as though she might cry again. When she found her composure, she said, “We’re not supposed to tell anyone.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “It’s all right. You don’t have to say.”

They lay for some time before her hand began exploring his chest, then moved down his belly. “You’re pretty fit for having travelled on a spacecraft for ten years.”

“I do what I can to take care of myself.”

She punched at his belly. “This is a bit more than just taking care of yourself. It feels like you’ve been modified.” She sat up on her elbow, the sheet falling away from her shoulders. He became aware of the nearness of her lips and her striking beauty despite the green hue of the light.

She scowled. “You’re not one of *them* are you?”

“Who’s that?”

She shifted slightly away from him. “You know who I’m talking about.”

“I don’t.”

As she stared at him, he wondered if she saw anything at all in the darkness. He hadn’t seen darkness in over fifteen years.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” she said. “I figured they’d be horrible, but you’re very nice.” As she settled beside him again, she hugged his chest. After a moment her hand slid up onto his collar bone before moving to the side of his neck. Her lips, soft and full, touched his temple.

His body thrilled at the sensation. “What are you doing?”

Her fingertips tickled down his ear to the lobe. She pulled on it. “I’ve spent the last ten years thinking my first time would be being raped by some filthy old miner. Now I have a handsome gentleman in bed with me. It’s a lot better than I’d hoped.”

“You don’t have to do that. I told you—”

“And tomorrow night?” Sitting up, she leaned over him, forearm on his chest, hair cascading around his face and shoulders. “I don’t want tomorrow night to be my first time. I’ve never even kissed a man.” She fell silent as her chin pulled tight.

“Cassandra, I’m so sorry.”

“Please,” she whispered, “call me Beth,” and kissed him full on the mouth.

The question for Chapter 6-

As a fighter’s strategy will rely heavily on an opponent’s strengths and weaknesses, will Crack be a large, powerful fighter or small and lightning-fast?