

Burning Sky

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Chapter 1

“But you won’t be able to...” He fell silent.

“You may speak of it, Lapushka,” Iskra said in her faded Russian accent, “With ten years to get there, I won’t have the years left in my life to return.” She laughed and patted his knee. Age had eroded her hand, leaving bones and veins. “I do not much care.”

Lukas hardly knew the old woman but felt drawn to her.

“Are you running from something?” He asked with a laugh.

She leaned in, smelling of industrial soap and wool. “Between us?” She glanced over her shoulder, and whispered, “Murder.” Her eyes glittered again as her smile shone broad teeth, too even and white to be real.

Lukas laughed.

“Lapushka,” she patted his knee, “sometimes there is no drama in life. Sometimes a man and a woman do not have children. When the man dies, perhaps the woman is reminded of her husband wherever she goes. Even the blue sky recalls their youth, when they would lay in the wheat fields watching clouds pass over the sun.”

He nodded with understanding. “The sky over Ignis Aeri is blood-red.”

She smiled with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “Not blood, fire.”

*Ignis Aeri, fire sky.*

“I will be able to say that I have travelled as far as any other man or woman. That is much better than sitting in a small apartment waiting for death. But,” she took hold of his hand, and he was surprised by the strength of it, “what about you? I see you speak with so few. Why do you keep to yourself?”

“Why do you call me Lapushka?”

She narrowed her eye. “You do not wish to speak of it?” She waved her hand as if shooing away a fly. “Is okay. It is term of affection. It means little paw. It reminds me of Russian tale called little wolf. I think you are like him. You are young, but,” she touched his chest, “there is something wild here. You are dangerous.”

Lukas shrugged.

“You won’t speak of it?”

“No.”

“Is it murder?” She laughed, but when he did not respond in kind, her smile faded. “Son, I have lived many years and seen that look in the eyes of young men before. You are a good boy. I can tell as much. But you are up to something, which will not end well. You should not dance with your troubles. Leave them be.”

He shook his head. “Unfortunately it is something I can’t... don’t want to avoid.” He let out a half-hearted laugh. He’d spent nine years aboard and told no one why he’d come. Now she’d almost gotten it out of him.

The old woman leaned in close again. “Please son... talk with me. It makes things better.”

He shrugged. “I’m here like everyone else, to mine the tellurium and iridium.”

She took hold of his hand, swept her old fingers over it front and back. “You are no miner. These,” she ran her finger over his scarred knuckles, “are the hands of a fighter.”

She gave him a sidelong look, and in it he understood she found his deceit interesting. She gave him the concerned smile of a mother as she said, “In time, you will tell me. We have a year before we reach Ignis Aeri. Now that we have opened the door to friendship, you will come to trust in me. I will help you with your burden.”

He touched her arm. “I don’t have a burden.”

She laughed aloud again, showing her resin teeth. “Every man has a burden Lapushka. It almost always is a woman.”

*A sister.*

In the final year of the journey, the old woman failed to prize his secret away from him, though she did try. Only at night, alone with his thoughts in his bunk, did he allow himself to think of his sister, but he couldn’t quite recall her face. He’d brought the clothes on his back, his credits on account, and a counterfeit passcard. No pictures—only fading memories. Each night, as he drifted off to sleep he’d think of her, only six when she’d disappeared, really only a shadow shape of a girl to him now, and when he came to the end of his memories, he’d walk through, one bloody moment at a time, what he planned to do to those who’d taken her.

On landing day, an atmosphere of trepidation filled the ship. As the years had passed many had planned a celebration on landing day, but now, after a decade living closed in on the ship, Lukas wanted only to breathe free air. Everyone else seemed to have the same feeling, in the final days of the journey, silence filled the arboretum and the canteen.

Even the five girls were silent, the reality of their situation seeming to have come home. They'd been young at the beginning of the journey, perhaps been ages six or so to eight. A middle aged woman, who did not strike Lukas as motherly, saw to them. When dealing with the girls, she had a heartless, flat look in her eyes.

Those girls had been the true mark of time passing for Lukas. He'd watched them transform from shy awkwardness into beautiful and somewhat boisterous young women. Too beautiful really... as though the group had been distilled from the best specimens the human race had to offer.

The woman made them exercise daily in the gym, where Lukas spent a great deal of time. The woman, however, seemed little interested in the girl's minds. He'd never seen the girls read or study. There was, of course, no formal schooling available for children on a ship of miners.

When they'd reached Ignis Aeri, the girls had an athletic air to them, long and lean. As he'd known them when young, he felt awkward in the feelings they provoked in him, so he did his best to avoid them. Still, he watched from a distance, feeling sure that their journey was an echo of Aspen's.

Aspen... They had an Aspen tree in the backyard. Its leaves, just outside his bedroom window, would tremble in the breeze. The whole tree seemed to glitter in greens and silvers around its pale trunk. It was beautiful, and that's how he chose to remember her, delicate and beautiful. Innocent.

Now, out the broad windows of the arboretum, instead of unmoving stars, the dark red surface of Ignis Aeri hung like a curse come to close itself. The loudspeakers called them to the transport shuttle. Two thousand people, sat row after row in the shuttle. As Lukas clipped in his

shoulder harnesses, the old woman walked by slightly hunched over. She pressed his shoulder as she passed.

Red lights began to stutter in their housings as the intercom blared, “Shuttle separation from Aries Four.”

The shuttle pitched slightly. He gripped his seat arms. One could never feel the huge Aries Four move, even in acceleration and deceleration, which had been subtle but absolutely continuous—accelerate for five years, decelerate for five years. In the middle of the journey, it had been said they were travelling half the speed of light.

After ten years of no motion at all, the slight shifting of the shuttle made his stomach flutter. The floor vibrated and thrummed. The thrumming grew to a rumble, and the vibration carried up into his spine, causing his cheeks and the tip of his nose to tickle. After a few moments, the rumble stilled, and the shuttle shifted back and forth in winged flight.

As he waited, he tried to imagine Ignis Aeri, which he’d done many times over the ten year journey. The brochures showed tall shining-steel towers and white-walled living quarters with calm gardens under glass domes. He felt that the gardens wouldn’t be quite that perfect, and that the walls of the dorms not that white. Brochures were always prettier than reality. Ignis Aeri couldn’t be the worker’s paradise it was sold as.

The shuttle thumped... floated... thumped again, and the even rumbling of wheels on a landing strip came through the floor followed by a deceleration.

Coming off the shuttle they walked down a long corridor with heavy grid-steel for decking, and exposed beams for walls and ceiling. Conduits and bare wires had been clamped beside the rough welds. The corridor smelled of iron and sweat. As the passengers made their

way down the corridor, the clanging of boots became almost deafening. Rounding a bend, he saw its end over the shoulders of the miners, taciturn men who'd been promised ten years work, a return ticket, and a pension for life. Beyond the end of the corridor, he imagined a large reception area, the corporation wanting to show its best to the new workers. As he stepped out of the corridor, he understood Veritas Corporation and Ignis Aeri all too well.

The ceiling was comprised of metal panels welded in place at the corners only. Lights with cages, mounted in the ceiling every ten feet or so were low enough to touch, and sparse enough to throw long shadows among the crowds of people moving like a river toward the open doors at the far end.

“Keep moving to the doors,” a thick man with a black uniform with the circular Veritas logo on its chest shouted out. While the guard held no weapons, his expression looked as though he had a gun on the crowd. Lukas shifted into the crowd away from the guard. He had one year to do what he'd come here to do before the Aries Four, restocked and refitted, returned for its ten year run back to Earth. But he had no idea where to begin to find a girl who's face he couldn't remember. Not a girl... a woman, who might not even be here. Where to begin looking? The planet, almost the size of Earth, had several settlements surrounding deep pit mines gouged into the surface like viral sores. The largest population, thirty thousand, was here in New Bingham. Most were miners, but there were those who served the miners—dentists, doctors, and the man who served their darker needs, Rashomon. Lukas had paid a high price, to obtain information on the man, who was no more than a ghost on Ignis Aeri's registries.

He'd begin with Rashomon.

He stood in the customs line, watching the agent checking miners in—a man of perhaps thirty, who had the look of a rodent with close-set eyes and a sharp nose. He seemed careless in his duty as he took each man's passcard, slipped it under the scanner, asked a few questions, and handed the card back with only a cursory look at the man's face.

Lukas ran his hand across the smooth surface of the card in his hand, which bore his holographic image and the name Zak Barrineau. At six-foot-two, two hundred pounds, and having ice-blue Scandinavian eyes, Lukas felt unsure if he could pass for a 'Barrineau'. He thought back to the half-dead looking old man who'd made the card. He'd lived in a back alley of the moldy Portland slums. The man had a brutally wet cough. Lukas felt sure he'd long since died. While he doubted if the man was competent enough to forge the card, the government had claimed was unhackable, it had gotten him on the shuttle.

"You'll be adopted," the man had said between wheezing inhalations, "That'll get you through all kinds of genetic questions." Wheeze. "Never knew your mother and father."

Lukas was perhaps fifth in line when the rodent-faced agent caught his eye. The sharp eyes, dark with wide irises that overwhelmed the whites, passed him and snapped back. Lukas looked away. When he looked back, he found the agent staring at him. He tipped his head, and the agent's eyes narrowed.

Lukas wished he'd gone through another line. None of the other agents looked up from their station aside from the single moment in their procedure which required it.

Lukas was now forth in line. The agent's eyes stayed on Lukas as he handed the miner his passcard and waved him through. He held out his hand for the next passcard, his eyes still on Lukas. Lukas looked beyond the agent, where more of the same low metal paneled ceiling and lighting ranged away, but no crowds, only individuals walking to the far doors. Viewed from

this crowded side, the run-down open space seemed inviting, almost pleasant. He wished he were there, beyond the rat-faced agent, freed from this hot air, heavy with the sour scent of unwashed humanity.

As the agent moved the man along, Lukas kept his eyes on the open space beyond. At the far end of the room, doors opened out into what appeared to be the wide world. As if a prisoner, Lukas hadn't seen the open sky in ten years, and while he knew it wouldn't be blue, he longed to see the expanse of it, to feel unfiltered wind.

Now only one traveler stood between him and the agent. From that distance he could hear the agent's dry, deep voice. He'd expected it to be high pitched and rat-like.

"Your purpose on Ignis Aeri?"

The man answered, "To mine, sir."

The agent swept his passcard under the reader. As he reviewed the information on the screen he clicked his teeth together.

He looked up at the man, "Your mother's maiden name?"

"Danjuma, sir."

The agent pursed his lips as though he found it offensive. Still, he handed the man's passcard back and waved him on. He held out his hand for Lukas' passcard.

*No problem Lukas, just answer the questions and get through.*

As Lukas stepped forward, he watched the miner who'd been before him cross the long expanse of the room, and exit out the door. A deep-red glow caught the wire-meshed glass in a flash as it closed, like sunlight through a heavy forest fire.

*Burning sky.*

He held out Zak Barrineau's passcard. The agent looked at it for a moment as though it was a pamphlet advertising erotic dancers, his eyes searching. He looked up to Lukas and went back to the card. He flexed it so hard Lukas almost protested. Turning it over, he let out a small scoff.

"Is there a problem?" Lukas asked.

The agent's eyes held an arrogant humor. "No."

He scanned the card and read the screen.

"You don't work for Veritas?"

"No."

"Why are you here?" he asked as though to come here for any other purpose was insane, which it probably was.

Lukas took a page from the old woman's playbook. "My wife and son were killed in an accident. I had to get away. No other reason."

The agent's eyes narrowed, and his mouth flexed as though he were trying to suppress a smile.

"Mother's maiden name?"

"Don't know. Orphaned."

*Say as little as possible.*

He tilted his head to the side as he looked over the passcard again. "Well, aren't you a sad case?"

Lukas felt his anger rising. "Excuse me, but—"

"Place of birth?"

"Detroit, Michigan."

The agent entered some information into his keyboard. He hadn't done that with the other passengers. He stared at his screen as if waiting for a response.

Lukas tried to be patient, but as time stretched out, his anger with the rat-eyed man began to crest. Finally he asked, "May I go?"

The agent looked at Lukas and licked his upper lip before saying, "...

The question was: Does the border agent let him pass?

The readers' votes: A landslide *yes*.