

## Burning Sky

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## Chapter 2

The agent held up the card between his index and middle finger and licked his upper lip before saying, “This has been forged.”

Lukas glanced beyond the agent to the doors. Along the sides of the open room stood security officers. One could tell a lot about an installation by its security. These men had uniforms pressed, but their shoes had creased leather, scuffed and unpolished. While each was larger than average, they had pale, slack faces and excessive weight at the belly. Security in this area was surface deep. No one jumped the border. If Lukas did, would they chase him down, or let him run? If he was caught, he might be indefinitely detained, or worse. If he fought his way through the guards and made it out, he’d have a mark on his head, and he’d be unable to fulfill his purpose. Subtlety was his only choice.

Lukas looked back to the agent, as the agent asked him slowly, one word at a time, “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see the sky.”

The agent turned his head from side to side. *No.*

An older agent, whose name badge read *Lt. Morse Gret—Veritas Security*, walked up brushing crumbs from the fabric of his white shirt, which was stretched taut across an ample

belly. He had an exhausted expression on his baggy face, which had the grayish, low-oxygen pallor of a lifetime nicotine huffer.

The agent leaned close to Gret, speaking quietly. Lukas caught the words “he’s lying” before the surrounding conversations and clanging boots washed their words away. As the agents spoke, Gret glanced at Lukas from time to time. Lukas thought he heard the word ‘crack’ just before Gret nodded and the narrow-eyed agent placed Lukas’ pass-card in it.

Gret gave it a cursory glance before extending it to Lukas, having to press his ample belly into the kiosk to reach. His face, which showed no signs of ever having done so, pulled outward into an unnatural smile. The smile did not involve his eyes.

In a voice roughened by years of poor health, Gret said, “I apologize, sir. Agent Werbel is overly cautious. He’s spent the last year working in exits. Lots of people trying to sneak out precious metals in creative...” he paused as one bushy, gray eyebrow lifted, “places.”

“Not the best experience.” The rat-faced Agent Werbel said as he too smiled, which seemed more threatening than friendly on his narrow face.

Lukas reached for his card.

“Ah,” Gret said, pulling the card away. “There is one thing.” He took a metal disk the width of his thumb from his pocket. “Ignis Aeri is not a tourist destination. It is a place for work, and everyone’s location is to be known per Veritas regulations.” He peeled the paper backing from the disk and pressed the disk to the card. The plastic melted slightly at the edges as faint smoke rose from the disk.

The supervisor fanned the card in the open air. “A nasty adhesive. Acid based.” He held the card out to Lukas, who took it by the edge and looked at the disk.

“You don’t have to worry about it” Gret said, a sincere smile now forming in his eyes.  
“It won’t fall off.”

Agent Werbel gave a slight laugh. His eyes, however, remained flat.

Without another word, Gret walked away.

Agent Werbel held his hand out to the distant doorway. “You may go, *Mr. Barrineau.*”

Lukas nodded once and walked past the station into the open space.

Agent Werbel called after him. “Mr. Barrineau?”

Lukas looked back.

“If you’re found without your pass-card, you will be detained indefinitely.” He winked and turned his back on Lukas, motioning for the next man to come to his kiosk.

Lukas walked toward the exit doors, which no longer suggested freedom as they had a few moments before. Now he felt as though he were a fox walking into a wire-framed trap. He looked down at the card, the metal disk melted into its plastic. No one else had received one. He’d been told that Ignis Aeri security was tight, particularly for exits, yet drugs and women did make it through. Men like Werbel and Gret would always be ready for a quick profit at questionable means. He felt sure they meant to profit on him but had no idea how.

Sliding the card into his pocket, he shoved the door open. As he stepped into the rose-colored light and looked upward, all his concerns fell away.

High above, the sky swirled with shades of red, from near-black magentas to glowing rose. He’d been told that the sky would mesmerize, but he had no idea how powerful the effect would be. The entire sky, from the northern dead mountains, to the southern plain coiled with glowing electricity. Beyond the twisting coils, the sun hung warping and stretching as if through a melting stained glass window.

Lukas ran into someone. The man, dressed in a rough, gray shirt, pushed him away, but kept his eyes on the sky. Looking around himself, Lukas found the gravel street filled with the miners from the Aries Four, all eyes up, mouths slack.

Security guards walked through the crowds yelling. “Move along folks. It’s not going anywhere. You can stare at it on your breaks.”

His eyes drew up to the sky again, and he closed them, willing himself to look away from the dizzying coils. Keeping his gaze low, he stepped around a barricade. The red-tinted light gave the skin and, more strikingly, the eyes of the men around him a faintly demonic appearance.

The gravel under his boots felt bizarre after ten years of walking on perfect surfaces in the Aries Four. He drew in a deep breath of air, which smelled of crushed stone. Fine, red dust, which for all he knew could have been white under normal light, coated window sills, railings, and shoulders. The gravel underfoot was dark black, and the dust among it a deep iron-red, like the surface of Mars.

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Morse Gret rounded a corner and saw Rashomon’s Yoshiwara. If rumors were to be believed, it had been named after an ancient Japanese pleasure district. The corrugated wall of welded shipping containers, stacked six high, towered over the other New Bingham structures. The block-long wall, a motley pattern of corporate logos and spray painted transport codes, looked like freight ready to be loaded. However, double doors extending fifteen feet high, almost to the top of the second stack, had been set in the center of the wall. Two men wearing black shirts over powerful chests and steroid-veined arms, stood to each side of the door.

As Morse approached the door, the guards ignored him, ready to let him pass. He stopped at the older guard, who had a scar running across his cataract-white right eye, giving his face a half-dead countenance.

“Hello Royer,” Morse said in a friendly tone. “Why does Rashomon have you minding the front?”

The guard’s gaze shifted to him. He exhaled as if disgusted. “What do you want Gret?”

“What do we all want?” Morse said with a submissive laugh. “A discount on the best girl in the house.”

“Are you disrespecting Madam Medea?”

Morse’s heart accelerated. “What? Christ no.” He laughed nervously, a chattering sound, which made him feel less of a man. The shame gave him a glow of anger, which he hid as he said, “I was just making a joke.”

The old guard, Dario Royer, glared at him.

Morse couldn’t help focusing on the dead eye as he said, “I came to talk with Rashomon.”

The guard made no sign he’d even heard him.

Morse held up his hand as if to touch Royer’s shoulder, but then thought better of it. He patted his own belly as he said, “I’ve found someone for the oval.”

Royer glanced at the door and back to Morse. “Promising?”

Morse nodded, glad to have cracked Royer’s wall, who was a hard man to read.

Royer’s good eye narrowed as he asked, “What do you have?”

Morse moved close to the guard and glanced over his shoulder at the younger guard, who had his attention on the miners coming and going through the doors. “There’s something to this one. That’s all I’ll say.”

“You expect me to disturb Rashomon for ‘something to this one’?” Royer seized Morse’s upper arm and pulled him close, filling the space between them with the faint scent of aftershave. “Go waste someone else’s time.”

Morse sighed. “Okay.” While he had not wanted to discuss it with anyone but Rashomon, he told Royer about the so called Zak Barrineau. “There’s something wrong with his story, but he’s a fighter. I can see that much in him.”

“You think he stands a chance?”

“Against Crack? You must be joking.”

Royer stared at him, and Morse wondered if the man had ever smiled. The guard’s dead eye twitched once and he said, “Wait here.”

As Morse waited, he watched the men come and go through the double doors. As they left, Gret could tell what their business had been by the look on their faces. The men who were closed off had been gambling, the others well... Rashomon had been very skilled at bringing some of the most beautiful women to Ignis Aeri. It was said that they were orphans, that they’d come of their own free will, and while that was somewhat unbelievable to Morse, the women he’d visited had been very willing. It was said they would do four years and then be sent home rich. He’d done the math. It didn’t add up. With what they were charging, four years would just cover their trip, and that didn’t allow much of a cut for Rashomon, who was a man who took a deep cut of everyone he touched.

A man approached wearing sunglasses, which weren't needed in the rose-colored light. Morse recognized him, Jorgen Barstad, CFO of Veritas' IA division. He walked with a shorter, broad-shouldered man with a shaved head, who also wore sunglasses. Morse didn't want to be seen standing at the doorway as if he was for some reason not allowed entry. Those who were not allowed entry to Rashomon's facility were either deadbeats or violent. Neither reputation would serve Gret well come his next review. He turned sideways as Barstad passed him.

“Mr. Morse Gret.”

Morse turned to find Barstad standing beside him, now holding his sunglasses in his hand. “How good to see you.” He shook Gret's hand, “but you shouldn't be waiting here. There's so much inside, eh?”

Morse was disturbed by Barstad. Indoors he had extremely pale blue eyes. Outside the rose colored light turned his eyes a faint, oxygen-deprived purple. He was young with deep-black hair, which he wore in ruffled spikes. Gret was not complimented that Barstad had remembered his name. Barstad was well known to remember everyone's name he'd ever met, which is why he made such a good CFO. He claimed to remember every number he'd ever seen or written down. People who remembered everything to the letter made Morse nervous, as if he were on camera.

“I'm waiting to talk with Rashomon,” Morse said, choosing candor over deceit. He was a terrible liar, had never been able to keep track of them, particularly with someone who would remember every detail.

Barstad's eerie eyes widened. “Oh? And what might you be meeting with him for?”

Morse had to think quickly. He considered saying that he'd rather not say, but that would raise more questions than it protected him from. One did not keep secrets from Jorgen Barstad.

"I have a man who came through customs today. He was built like a fighter."

"So you plan on pitting him against Crack?"

Morse nodded his agreement.

"Does this man know he's been tapped to dance?"

"No."

Barstad's permanent little smirk drew into a full smile. "Well, I suppose if he's as interesting as you say... what did you say his name was?"

"I didn't."

The smile faded from Barstad's face. "What is his name Mr. Gret?"

Morse shifted his weight. He looked to Barstad's body guard, standing two steps away, his head turned sideways to watch the street.

"Zak Barrineau." Morse felt as though he needed to stop speaking of it before someone took his commission out from under him. "I'd feel more comfortable sir, discussing everything after I've had a chance to talk with Rashomon." He pointed to two men leaving the double doors who, based on their lowered eyes and grim mouths, had lost the better portion of their pay and perhaps, their ration cards on gambling.

At this Barstad laughed aloud. "Worried so much over such a small amount."

"Not so small if he wins a few rounds."

At this the smile fully left Barstad's face, and in that dark look, Morse felt as though he was seeing the true man. "You think he might?"

Morse felt himself nodding even as he said, “I’d really rather talk after I’ve had a chance to discuss terms with Rashomon.”

Barstad’s smile returned, but thinly. “Fair enough Gret. I must be going anyway. Rashomon has new girls in from the Aries Four.”

“Yes I saw them... beautiful girls.”

Barstad gave him a wide grin. “Excellent. I like to be here on the first day. It costs a mint, but they are very... interesting their first time.”

Morse wouldn’t know. He didn’t care for the younger girls. Holding out his hand to the door, he said, “I wouldn’t want to delay you further.”

Barstad gave him an amiable smile and walked through the door, followed by his bodyguard. No matter how pleasant, Morse didn’t like him. He seemed dangerous in a psychopathic way, as if the rest of humanity were simply toys.

Dario Royer emerged from the doorway, caught Morse with his one good eye, and motioned for him to follow. “Rashomon wants to hear what you have to say. Be cautious though, he’s in a terrible mood.”

Morse let out a small laugh in an attempt to quell his nervousness. “Is Medea causing him heartache?”

Royer stared at him for a moment, before saying, “No one causes Rashomon heartache... for long.”

Feeling as though he’d already failed to heed Royer’s warning, Morse followed.

After passing through a second set of doors, they entered the floor of the casino, a sea of blackjack and poker tables torch-cut from sheet metal. A roulette machine, which had been constructed from an old bearing assembly from a pit cart, stood in the center of the room. The

door panels of shipping containers comprised the floor, which gave a dead thump of metal on dirt as Morse followed Royer to the side staircase, which had been welded to the inner wall of the shipping containers. This main room was four containers high, perhaps thirty feet to the girders, which supported the ceiling. To the right and left were other rooms for gambling. In the upper stories were the women.

He followed Royer up the clanging staircase. Dust hung in the beams of sodium light. Rashomon had been rumored to have made a contract for power with Veritas, with men like Barstad. They provided the essentials to him, and he of course offered the essential a 95% male planet was desperate for. Rashomon had become wealthy and powerful trading in skin.

Reaching the upper gallery, Morse looked down on the men hunkered over card tables. Those men did not hold the hope of fortune in their hands, they held the hope of distraction and perhaps one small victory in a thankless, twelve-hour-shift life. The brochures did not detail how many hours the men would be mining. Twelve hours a day with six on Sunday, every day except Christmas. When they were done with their shift, they'd come here for a few hours, feel the glow of hope, and go home. If they were willful enough to save their money, they could spend the evening with a beautiful woman, and in a place like Ignis Aeri that was like being transported to another world of soft breezes and warm sun.

Here one couldn't feel the sun on one's skin. The magnetic fields didn't let in enough radiation for that. Ignis Aries did not tilt in its orbit as Earth did. Aside from the occasional dust storm, there was no weather. The place was the same every day, approximately nineteen degrees Celsius, slightly rose-colored, and dead-dry. But here, inside Rashomon's Yoshiwara, stamped with corporate logos from Hyundai to Sprek, there was respite, and Morse felt it now. He, like so many others, loved this steel citadel staked into the heart of New Bingham, and for creating it,

Morse loved Rashomon. If he told Morse to stab someone like Barstad in the neck, he'd probably do it.

At the back of the structure, Royer led him into an entrance of several S-turns of corrugated steel panels. In the corner of every S-turn stood a guard. Coming out of the turns, they walked down a hallway Morse had never seen and approached double doors with two more guards standing on either side.

Royer nodded.

The guards did as well.

Royer pushed open a door and motioned for Morse to follow him. Inside Morse found another set of stairs leading upward covered in woven carpeting which swallowed his footfalls as he ascended. This was not Rashomon's offices where Morse had met with him before. Royer was taking him to Rashomon's private chambers. That disquieted Morse. Medea might be there. He'd heard rumors that Rashomon could fly into a jealous rage if a man so much as looked at her.

The question: Is Medea in the room with Rashomon? Does Rashomon treat Morse Gret nicely or harshly?