

## Chapter 7

Caged lights sent cross-hatched shadows rolling over Royer's shoulders as he walked ahead of Lukas. Buried deep in the Yoshiwara, the scrap-welded passage had no ventilation. The stagnant air and the coarse-sand floor muffling their boots made Lukas feel as though he and Royer were walking down the throat of a massive dead animal.

The corridor ended in an steel-plate door. Taking hold of the handle, Royer looked back at Lukas and, his tone laced with contempt, said, "You want to impress me? End the fight in thirty seconds. Do that and you'll keep Cassandra as your private companion until the next fight. But if you go even a tenth of a second over," a slight smile formed on his lips, "I'll put her on the penny rung to pay back her debt."

The suggestion that the women were somehow indebted to Rashomon made Lukas' fingers curl toward a fist. He ran his thumb over his fingertips and let the flare of anger go with a slow exhale. Paying back debt meant they'd be set free, but these young women, Beth and probably Aspen, had agreed to nothing and would receive no arrears. They were no better than animals to men like Royer... caged, beaten, drugged, their names changed, identities stripped. Rashomon would be a fool to let them go free. In the end, Beth's payment would probably be a pit grave somewhere in a dark corner of Ignis Aeri.

Lukas said, “I imagine there are many good places to hide bodies on this planet.”

Royer scowled. Misunderstanding, he said, “You insist on threatening my life, but if you kill me, Sanctuary Guard or not, you’ll never get out alive.”

Lukas smiled. “What gave you the impression I want out alive?”

A flicker of worry weakened Royer’s glare for just a moment before he caught himself and punched a finger into Lukas’ chest. “Just take him out in thirty seconds or she works until she spent.”

“I thought you said I wouldn’t win.”

“You won’t.”

“But you decided to put money on me anyway. Thirty seconds is a very specific number. Don’t you worry that bet’s too obvious?”

A full smile bloomed across Royer’s face. “There’s no bet. Just impossible odds. I want to see you fail so I can be done with you. Your opponent’s name is Polzin.” He pointed upward to an unseen place. “They call him the Anvil. No one’s lasted more than one minute against him.”

“What about fighting Crack?”

“If you somehow beat Polzin, which you won’t, we’ll see about Crack.”

“How long are the rounds?”

Royer laughed brightly as he shook his head. “No rounds. The time runs until a fighter submits or dies.”

Lukas offered no reaction.

“You however,” Royer’s smile faded as though he’d remembered something that angered him, “have one thirty-second round.”

Lukas nodded. “What are Polzin’s strengths?”

Royer shoved the plate-metal door open, the hinges giving a long, high yowl. “His strengths? Everything.”

He and Lukas stepped into a small room heavy with the smell of copper and urine. The door slammed shut behind them. Two wire-mesh cages stood on the far wall. Inside, roll-up doors lead into what Lukas imagined was the arena. The wire mesh of the cages had been bent through the supports as though kicked and punched by many fighters. A small strip of dried skin hung from the metal, chest high.

Royer pulled the right-hand gate up. “Wait in here.”

When Lukas stepped in, Royer crashed the gate closed, locking the hasp. “Your fight starts when the previous fighters are cleared from the arena.” He walked toward the door.

“Aren’t you going to wish me luck?”

Royer let out a heartless chuckle. “No.” Stopping at the door, he looked back at Lukas. “You know... I think after Polzin breaks you across his knee, I’ll let him have Cassandra first. Maybe we’ll make you watch.” He went quiet for a moment, as if picturing it in his mind’s eye. “Yeah. If you live, that’s what we’ll do.”

Lukas didn’t bite. “If I win she’s safe. I have your word.”

Royer nodded. “Despite what you may think of it, you have my word, which is solid. She’ll be safe from everyone... but you.” He pulled the door open. “Tell me, are all Sanctuary Guards rapists?”

Lukas flinched at that, and Royer smiled. “Apparently so.”

He stepped out. As the door swung shut, he said over the groaning hinges. “Take him in thirty and you get another fight and can use the girl however you like. The day you lose, everyone else gets a turn.” The door slammed closed.

When silence returned, Lukas listened to the thrum coming through the roll-up door. He set the flat of his hand on its corrugated surface. Warm. It tremored with the energy of the crowd. Beyond, metal clashed, and the crowd roared. A solid thump. The roar went low. Lukas moved to the center of his cage and let his mind go still.

The crowd roared again, and the ceiling thundered with what Lukas assumed was pounding feet.

He let the crowd and the arena go and considered Polzin. How big? The Anvil... That was the name of a powerful man. Would he be a short fireplug or a giant with long reach? Lukas interlaced his fingers behind his back, pulling his arms up behind himself, letting the stretch across his shoulders slow his heart. Either way, he'd be dangerous. Lukas passed his mind over the weakest joints... knees, elbows, fingers. He pictured the nerve bundles... groin, sides of the neck, and the easily breakable places, the floating ribs, throat, the jaw. Perhaps Lukas was off though. What if Polzin was lightweight... fast... No. Crack was the clockwork tactician. Royer had something else in mind this time...

*Thirty seconds... There'll be no time to sell the fight, to offer the crowd a back and forth.*

Winning too easily would bring too much attention, which is exactly what Royer wanted. The thirty second limit, especially against a much more powerful fighter, would force Lukas to expose his true talents. Royer had played his hand well. However... if Lukas made his victory look accidental... He considered for a moment how that could happen depending on Polzin's tactics. Winning so quickly would require a severe injury at the least. At the worst, death. He'd

long since stopped questioning how many questionable men could die to save an innocent life before the salvation became an immoral act.

Far down the hallway, beyond the steel plate doors, Lukas heard footfalls, heavy with a long stride.

“Definitely a big one,” he said to himself.

The door shoved open, and a towering man crouched to come through. When he stood upright again, shoulder’s squared, legs like tree trunks, Lukas scanned him at 2.19 meters and 174 kilos.

Crossing the small space, he kept his eyes, shadowed by the block precipice of his forehead, forward as though he couldn’t be bothered with so much as a glance at his opponent. He had a jaw like the prow of an asteroid mining ship. With his trapezius muscles starting just under his ears and ending at deltoids the size of human skulls, he appeared to have no neck. He looked like a dehorned minotaur. No one Lukas had seen on Ignis Aeri could likely stand against him.

Lifting the cage door with one arm, the mounds of chest and shoulder flexing under the rough gray fabric of his shirt, the man stepped through and let the gate slam down behind him. The crash filled the room, leaving a ringing in Lukas’ ears. Moving to the center of the space, the man did something Lukas hadn’t expected. Kneeling, he touched his shoulders one at a time, his forehead, and then his heart. He began whispering in Belarusian so quietly, if Lukas hadn’t had modified ear drums or sound processors imbedded in his cochlea, he wouldn’t have been able to pick up the words. Lukas’ processors offered a text translation hovering in glowing letters in the space between he and the man.

“Please grant us a good conflict. While our fists clash, let our souls remain at peace. I will be grateful if you protect my opponent from lasting harm. Thank you for my opportunity to entertain the men and for my worthy challenger.”

Standing, the man turned to Lukas. Instead of the dense expression Lukas had expected, he found himself looking into calm, jade-green eyes. Their depth under the cliff of his brow, reminded Lukas of the North Sea in summer, coiling against the Scottish coast. Extending his broad hand through the bars where a hole in the mesh had been ripped open, he said in a resonant voice with a heavy accent, “I am Jessrai Polzin and am grateful to meet you.”

Lukas scanned Polzin. His exhaled breath showed no spent adrenaline, pupils were wide, eye moisture up, pulse low, facial muscles relaxed.

Perceiving no threat, Lukas took hold of Polzin’s extended hand, which engulfed his and gripped gently as Lukas said, “The Anvil.”

Polzin released Lukas’ hand. Shrugging, he said, “Perhaps.” He regarded Lukas for a moment before scowling. “Why would they send you to fight me?”

“You don’t want to fight me?”

Polzin shook his head. “You have confidence, which makes me wonder, but I don’t want to hurt you. You are far too small to be match for me.”

The crowd’s roar rose up, growing louder and louder.

“Almost time,” Polzin said.

Lukas’ gate wrenched upward, with a screech of metal exposing the arena, a wide oval space made from shipping containers with a metal railing welded to the top. Throngs of men stood at the railing, all eyes on the open gate. Behind them a higher row of shipping containers

made a second row, and behind it a third, each with a railing... a steel coliseum. In the center of the area, a significant spray of blood lay soaking into the dirt.

Lukas looked back to Polzin who pointed into the area. “Go and give your best. We will raise a glass tonight.”

*It would be so much easier if you'd been a sociopath.*

Lukas stepped out with a heavy heart. The miners hissed and heckled and pounded their fists on the waist high railing. One man unzipped his fly and pissed on the dirt to Lukas' right. The penny rung Beth would service if he failed came to mind.

He scanned the arena. Nothing but dirt under a coiling red sky. No weapons. Nothing to dodge behind. He felt despair. Polzin wasn't the kind of man he wanted to expend to save Aspen. But 30 seconds... there was no time to wear him down, and despite his modifications, Polzin could severely injure or even kill him. Lukas had no choice but to disable him. But what would stop the fight and be repaired easily? The knee. The knee could be obliterated and then outright replaced. Okay... the knee. But Polzin relied on his legs to work. He looked to the miner who had finished urinating but stood with his fly open, wiggling his hips and laughing, exposing a mouth half filled with dark teeth.

*Polzin or Beth. Not just Beth... Aspen. How had it become two?*

His eyes tracked along the crowd, until they reached a dais at the far side of the arena with a silken purple lounge. White linens hung over the dais, strung from pine pillars which had been intricately carved with the thick bands and swirls of the Northern Japanese Ainu. A muscular Japanese man with an efficiently trimmed white beard reclined on the lounge in a pure-white kimono. Seeing Rashomon for the first time, Lukas felt he already knew him. He had, to a degree. Many of the terrible men he'd met, the good majority of whom he'd killed under state

directives, had the same easy look of control and certainty in their eyes... until Lukas had taken their ease from them. Lukas felt sure this was the man ultimately responsible for Aspen's disappearance, and he knew he'd make Rashomon pay dearly for whatever horrors she'd faced.

The fact that Rashomon sat alone surprised Lukas. Most men who had power over so many women flaunted that power at their sides like rings on fingers. Lukas' eyes narrowed as he scanned Rashomon. Weight, height, exhalations, body fat. A short strip of metal at his hip hidden under the fabric. A wakizashi.

The gate behind him lashed upward, crashing to a stop, and Polzin walked out, his heavy boots, thumping with each step. The crowd went wild screaming and cheering. Then the chant rose up from the left and swept around the arena in a deep, thumping rhythm, "Anvil, Anvil, Anvil."

Something whipped the air. Smooth, hard, 92.63 kph. Lukas' hand flashed up. The stone slapped into his palm. A glowing thread in his HUD traced the stone's path back to a man whose eyes went wide when Lukas met his gaze. He weighed the stone in his hand, analyzed the shape, and a red crosshair appeared on the man's forehead. The crowd fell silent, all eyes on him. Lukas let the stone drop to the dust wishing he'd dodged it instead of catching it.

*What's done is done.*

He shrugged at Polzin, saying, "Luck."

Polzin scowled. "Perhaps."

Lukas held up his hands in supplication. "How do we begin?"

"First," Polzin said, pointing to Rashomon's platform. "We offer thanks to Rashomon and Medea."

"Medea?"



“Rashomon’s mistress.”

Lukas looked up to the dais. When their eyes met, Rashomon’s lips tightened. Lukas could see he’d already exposed too much to a dangerous man.

In the stands behind him, someone said, “She’s back.” The crowd went still as all eyes turned to the dais. A woman wearing a long, white dress with a white hood over her head came into view to the left walking with two guards. The guards remained at the base of the steps as she ascended and sat beside Rashomon. Lowering her hood, she exposed a pale, innocently beautiful face, full lips, long nose, gem-green eyes.

As she took gentle hold of Rashomon’s head and kissed his lips, Lukas felt as though his entire world had shattered.

“Aspen,” he said in a choked whisper.

**Question: Does Medea recognize Lukas?**