

ACE'S ODDS

FATE'S FAVOR



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CHAPTER 1



The cards he held were the last hand he could afford to buy into. If the final draw didn't go his way, Mkhai would bow out with a smile, then go find a nice, dark passageway and wait for someone to shoot him. They'd be the suckers when they searched his corpse, though. There would be nothing to find but pocket lint in his old jacket that was comfortable with wear, but showing its age.

He didn't bother hiding his weary smirk at the thought, knowing that the other players at the table would make of it whatever they wanted. Mkhai tapped his finger on the green felt once, trading out a single card.

Two players folded.

The other man, Tal Ferenti, stared at the memory ball he'd tossed in during the previous round. It held the codes to a small ship docked in Bay 7, and it bobbed slightly on the pile of chips in the middle of the table. Tal stared at his hand again, and a bead of sweat trickled down his receding hairline.

The guy was no good, Mkhai decided as he waited him out. Too volatile to be a decent card player. Too much of a braggart when he won, and too angry when he lost. He'd lost a few credits to some poor kid with a good hand last month, then stood up and shot him. If the

kid hadn't been up on his nanos, he'd be dead. Luckily, there were no weapons on him this time. Mkhai had watched security search the man thoroughly before he sat at the table.

Mkhai kept his breath even as he waited. He knew Tal hadn't had the ship long. Had, in fact, just won it from someone else earlier in the week, and then beaten the loser to a pulp and left him bleeding by the reprocessing station. He must owe some pretty bad people if he was willing to put those codes on the table. If nothing else, Mkhai wanted to win now just to rub Tal's nose in it.

"Fuck it. Call." Tal showed his cards. Two royal pairs.

It was a decent hand. Too bad it couldn't beat Mkhai's three of a kind. Even if they were all deuces.

The rush of his heartbeat pounded in his ears, deafening him. Tal pushed his chair back, screaming and waving his hands around, but it all seemed to happen at a distance, in another dimension, in another reality that ran parallel to his own. The dealer called over security, but Mkhai just watched that memory ball, sure it would disappear. That was how his luck ran.

But when everything quieted down, it was still there in the pile of chips. Real sound finally broke through the static.

"Sir? Would you like a bag?"

It took a moment to understand what the dealer was offering. "Yes. A bag would be very helpful."

His hands shook as he scooped the pile of chips into a soft black bag with the name of the casino printed on it. The ball, he tucked up his sleeve. Picking out two high-value chips, he flipped them to the dealer, who caught them deftly and smiled. "Thank you, sir. And congratulations."

Mkhai nodded and made his way to the cashier's cage. The bag of chips turned into a stick of digital credits, and he stood in front of the open doors of the casino, staring into the graying dawn of Gizem Station.

The space station was a glitzy, glamorous playground for anyone who had the credits to spend, on any indulgence of the flesh. But only

a fool would be blind to the darkness that made the lights so bright in contrast.

Mkhai was no fool, and he knew he still owed Zev, the man who made Gizem possible. And he owed Zev big. The memory stick filled with digital credits in his pocket would pay off his debt, but not the interest he'd accrued. The ship, though, was the real wealth. It could earn him enough to get clear of Zev and the fucking dunyasi forever.

A terrible hope pierced his chest, and he tried to kill it. Hope was futile at best, deadly at worst. He'd tasted it too often not to recognize its bitter flavor on his tongue, so he tapped out one of his last garros and was unsurprised at the tremor in his fingers as he lit up.

Almost as if they'd been summoned, a pair of familiar knee-breakers flanked him.

"Xhao-li would like to speak to you."

"Of course he would. Word moves fast." Mkhai blew out a harsh plume of smoke. Zev's favorite moneylender always knew when someone came into credits.

The recycled air of the station wasn't what anyone would call fresh, but it was still better than the stuffiness that pervaded the casino he'd just left. He wasn't eager to get into a transport with these two goons who were completely uninterested in whether he walked out of Xhao-li's office on his own two feet, or his body was carried to the reproprocessors.

"Would you mind if we walked? It's a nice night for it."

They looked at each other and shrugged, so he turned to the right and started walking. It really was a nice night. The station was never fully asleep, but this close to dawn -- the artificial cycle of sunlight was just beginning to break through the darkness -- was as near quiet and peaceful as anyone here would ever find. He finished his garro and flicked the butt into a nearby reproprocessor. Only the sounds of their footsteps nearly in sync with each other impinged on the silence. He emptied his mind, and imagined that he'd walk this way forever.

A throat cleared behind him and he returned to reality. The door they stood before was so dark it seemed to suck in and swallow all the

surrounding light. Mkhai's lip quirked up. Very forboding. Extra points for atmosphere.

One of the guards reached forward and opened the door, then escorted him into an office that was sumptuous in its spareness. At the center, behind an empty desk, sat a small, older man with skin the color of the yellowed paper books he'd seen in a museum once. Narrow, dark eyes drooped with age, but the gleam in them was sharp and predatory.

Mkhai straightened, then bowed at the waist. "Xhao-li."

The underboss nodded in return and gestured him into one of the two uncomfortable looking chairs before the desk. "Mkhai Kerbasi. I heard you had a fortuitous night."

"You must have the fastest ears on the station. I didn't even have time to get a celebratory drink."

"Then allow me."

One of the guards who had been stationed at the door came forward and poured them both two generous fingers of some very choice alky, smooth and smoky, and not at all like the tank-gin Mkhai could usually afford when he wanted to rot his insides.

"To your good fortune." Xhao-li raised his glass and drank.

Mkhai took the time to sip at the golden elixir he'd been served. Who knew if he'd ever have the opportunity to savor this particular vintage -- or anything else -- again? He tipped up the glass to be sure the last drop didn't go to waste.

"Done celebrating?" Xhao-li asked.

"It seems so." Not a bad last drink, if that's what it came to.

"You owe us a great deal of money." The older man templed his fingers under his chin, and Mkhai suddenly had the feeling of watching a well-rehearsed drama, in which he had an improvisational, but starring role.

"And you wanted to be sure that I didn't skip station without paying my debt. I sense that's happened before."

"Mistakes were made early on. We've corrected those errors and those who might wish to flee their obligations have also been... corrected."

He'd seen the results of those corrections, hobbling around on permanently maimed kneecaps, or making do with a few less fingers than they were originally assigned. It took all he had not to count his own fingers for reassurance.

"It's a good thing I'm such a rule follower. I have your capital right here."

Mkhai reached into his jacket pocket, and the guards twitched forward. Xhao-li waved them back. The tiny stick felt heavy, and removing it from his coat restored his balance.

"The capital, yes, but not the interest."

He spread his hands. "That's all I've got."

"That's not strictly true, though, Mr. Kerbasi." Xhao-li leaned forward, and the sudden gleam in his black eyes took him from sedate businessman to a ship rat with the scent of prey in his nostrils. "You have a ship now."

Shit. He'd hoped against hope the underboss hadn't known about that, but it couldn't be helped.

"I have the codes to what Tal said was a ship. I haven't even seen it yet. It might be a pile of junk."

"The Merkep, registered previously to Tal Ferenti, is a light freighter used for medium sized cargo shipments." He gestured to one of the guards, who came forward with a tablet. Xhao-li turned it so Mkhai could see the image. "It's not pretty, but at last check, it could be made serviceable. Mr. Ferenti would have done better to sell the Merkep rather than try to gamble his way out of his debt to me. I'll have to think of another use for him."

"So you want the ship? If it's still in decent shape, it would more than cover my interest." Mkhai ignored the old man's blathering about Tal. Ferenti was a known asshole who deserved what he got. But the ship... Mkhai wanted it so much, he could taste it. But it wasn't worth his life. Or his kneecaps.

"It would, and we'd be happy to work out a deal if you chose to sell. However, we think an alternate arrangement might be better and simpler for all of us. We wish to employ you."

Mkhai tensed. He had no intention of becoming a slave to Zev for the rest of his life over a usurious interest rate.

Xhao-li's eyes flickered in acknowledgement. "Not forever, you understand. A year, perhaps. Not long at all, if you consider the potential brevity of life itself." The subtle threat hung for a moment before he continued. "A few lucrative runs where we take a reasonable percentage would fully cover the remainder of your debt to us. You would naturally also take any small job we would ask of you for no charge until the deficit is repaid."

"Naturally. You mentioned a reasonable percentage?" Mkhai lifted an eyebrow. Neither the threat nor the caveats surprise him.

"Fifty," proposed Xhao-li.

"Fifteen."

"Forty-five."

"Twenty."

"Forty. And that's as good as this is getting."

Mkhai sighed and asked hopefully. "Thirty?"

"I can go back to forty-five."

"Forty it is."

A tiny smile lifted Xhao-li's lips, and Mkhai wished it hadn't. A chill worked its way up his spine, and he did his best to cover his shudder. He stood and bowed again before leaving the office with the two heavyweights who had brought him in.

The beating that followed was almost perfunctory. Just a formality, really. Their hearts weren't really in it, and he waved at the goons when they shoved him out of their transport in front of the Merkep's slip. He spat blood from a cut inside his cheek and straightened slowly against his bruised ribs.

Home.