

THE LAST SKY

SAMPLE FIRST CHAPTER

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THE GIRL

ISAAC RHODES DIDN'T NOTICE HER AT FIRST WHEN HE WALKED into the bondmarket. He had a job to do—goods to deliver, credits to collect, and touch as few surfaces as possible on his way the hell out of there. This planet always left him feeling dirty. A layer of moral decay no decontamination shower ever scrubbed clean.

But the credits were good, and guys like Isaac couldn't afford to let their conscience take the helm. Keeping off the Authority's radar had a way of closing all but the least reputable doors. Behind this one, a ramshackle bar clung to the wall like an afterthought. Must be thirsty work, trading in human lives like they were spare parts.

Sighing, Isaac took a seat and signalled the unfamiliar barkeep.

"In a minute, Terran," the guy said, wrestling with a bottle of White.

Always someone's first day around here. The bondmarket was a revolving door of deadbeats. Most of them local Ignites, easy to spot with their green, sulphide-tinted skin. And all of them broke as hell, with a kind of desperate look about them that said, 'I sold my moral compass for a quick credit.'

"Need a hand with that?" Isaac said, then stifled a grin when the barkeep cursed under his breath. Guess not.

Craving a hit of Brown, Isaac glanced around the auction floor. It

was dark, the lights kept low around the periphery of the warehouse, offering plenty of places for the vermin of Ignis Prime to scuttle into the shadows.

A handful of traders clustered around the only illuminated structure: the auction block. Harsh spotlights snagged on the steel cage perched on the podium, scattering reflections around the room like stars. No doubt designed to distract from the poor soul trapped inside.

Isaac clenched his jaw.

“No heroics today, Ro. We need this job.” Stella’s terse voice buzzed out of his earpiece.

And though she was right—they did need this job; they needed every job—the corner of Isaac’s mouth twitched. “No heroes here, darlin’.”

“Oh, really? Your heart rate’s up, adrenalin too. And after hauling your ass around the Skyfield for ten years, I know you, Isaac Rhodes. Think about me for once, huh? Last time they locked you up, I got impounded.”

“Was it so bad? Parked in some cosy shipyard for, what, a week?”

“Until a half dozen engineers strip you to your wiring, you don’t get a say, human.”

Isaac exhaled a laugh, but as he swivelled on his stool, he finally spotted her: that scrawny thing, huddled in a cage beside the podium. Frowning, he turned to stare at... was that a kid? From out of a tight self-embrace, a pair of enormous eyes peered out, fixed on him from across the room.

Tension spread across his chest.

A child at auction? That was new. And definitely illegal. Even on backlane worlds like Ignis Prime, where the Authority’s all-seeing-eyes had cataracts, there were some lines you didn’t cross.

And yet, this little girl—

“What’ll it be?”

A curt voice snapped Isaac out of his thoughts. He turned to find the barkeep leaning on the counter. Except—Isaac glanced the guy up and down—he was mistaken. This wasn’t some low-level

employee, fudging his first day on the job. This guy, with his tailored suit, expensive wrist console, and cybernetic ocular implants must be the manager.

The guy getting rich from selling little kids in cages.

Isaac rose to his feet. He towered over the manager, who swallowed and pressed his lips into a pale, tremulous line. A cheap point—maybe even below the belt—but it felt good. Every Ignite Isaac met seemed to hate the way their planet’s sulphuric atmosphere stunted their growth compared to humans from other worlds, and few were so tall as the Terrans.

Back home, Isaac was just an average guy. His height, broad shoulders, and lean build about as remarkable as a grain of sand on a beach. But out here, in the Fringe, people noticed him in a way that made him uncomfortable. Especially in recent years.

Not many Terrans left in the Skyfield these days.

“I got a delivery,” he said, lowering his deep voice to score another cheap point. “I left it out back with one of your guys.”

The manager swiped a tablet from the counter and flicked his finger across the greasy screen. As he scrolled through his records, Isaac glanced sidelong at the little girl in the cage. She’d climbed onto her knees, her dirty hands around the bars. Each knuckle wore a graze.

His throat constricted.

“CC-*Stella One*?” The manager glanced up from his tablet. “You’re two days late.”

“You been living under a rock, pal? Lane Zeta-Two went down. Pile up stopped all traffic. No way through. The backlog alone took over twelve hours to get moving again.”

“Am I supposed to care? You’ll be docked ten percent per day, as per the contract. Trouble in the Star Lanes is not our problem.”

A dark smile spread across Isaac’s face as he leant over the bar. “It is if you want contraband smuggled in from the other side of the Skyfield.”

The manager recoiled, eyebrows shooting up his forehead. “Who said anything about contraband?”

“Are you kidding me?” Isaac exhaled a laugh. “You think anyone hauling for the Nexus doesn’t know the game? I mean, I’m not proud of it, but dodging the Authority’s prying eyes? That’s worth its weight in extra credits. Keeps my ship flying instead of decorating some asteroid’s surface. You get my drift?”

The manager folded his arms.

“And here’s the thing, they only pay me after I complete a job. Those credits you’re itching to dock? They’re Nexus credits, not mine.”

The manager swallowed, but he attempted to make up for it by raising his chin. Might have worked if his jaw wasn’t quivering. “Sounds like another ‘you’ problem.”

Isaac straightened up, staring down his nose at the other man. He let the silence hang heavy for a moment, then slid his gaze over the dark, shadowy corners of the room.

“Nice set-up you got here. Always busy when I pass through, plenty of...” He struggled not to spit the word, “*stock* comes your way, huh? It’d be a real tragedy if the Authority carried out an inspection, what with your, uh...” He jerked his head at the little girl, and his voice sharpened, “creative interpretation of commerce regulations.”

The manager sucked in a trembling breath, which seemed to inflate his slouching posture. His hands flew to his hips, a clear attempt at intimidating Isaac. A pity his squeaky voice betrayed him. “All my dealings are perfectly legitimate.”

And in a triumph of good timing, the auctioneer bellowed over of the sound system, “Next up, lot three-eighty. We have a human child. Female. Cellular decay puts her at nine standard years and five months. Origins unknown. Likely the sole survivor of a shipwreck. She crash-landed in an escape pod two days ago. DNA shows no planetary artefacts, and RNA sequencing suggests she’s been in space her whole life. Seems a little slow... alright, a lot slow. Might do for field work, or, uh—” He cleared his throat.

Isaac turned sharply to stare at the man under the spotlight. An off-worlder. No green tint to his skin. Everything about him screamed fraud: from his desperate comb-over tied back in a scraggly

tail, to the 'designer' suit with crooked seams, to the fake leather peeling off his boots.

He carried himself like a seasoned broker, his chin raised, accent refined—as if he wasn't a guy selling kids in cages to the lowest moral bidders of Ignis Prime.

The auctioneer mopped his brow, then hurried on under his breath, "there's no denying she's a striking specimen, alright? Got that Luxian look about her, minus the green eyes. With the right lenses, she might fool a fool. Something to consider."

He cleared his throat again and straightened up. "Even so, we'll start the bidding low on this one. She knows a whole lot'a nothing about nothing. Can't even feed herself."

Isaac exhaled a slow breath out of his nose.

"Oh, no." Stella groaned in his ear. "Just take the credits and get out, Ro. I'm begging you. One more of my systems fails, and all the smooth-talking in the galaxy won't save us. I'll get sold for scrap, and you'll end up on some backlane world like this. You'll finally get your way and drink yourself into oblivion. No, sir. We're not playing hero today. If you wanted to save lives, you should never have left the—"

"Alright, alright," Isaac said under his breath, cutting her off.

Stella never forgot anything—a perk of artificial intelligence he often envied—and by the tone of her voice, she'd spent months rehearsing this lecture.

He turned his back as a hoist lifted the girl's cage onto the podium. It creaked and rattled, the mechanisms decayed like everything else in this dump. The manager stared at him, his mouth twisted into a thin line of hostility.

After glaring for a long beat, the Ignite leant on the counter. "Are you threatening me, Terran? Is that what you're trying to do?"

Isaac shrugged a crooked smile. "Just making an observation. It *would* be a shame if the Authority sent an auditor this way, wouldn't it?"

A distinctive hiss drew Isaac's gaze to the man's waist, where an ember glowed deep inside the barrel of a pulse pistol. The manager

raised his gun, keeping it hidden from his patrons behind the ridge of the bar as he aimed at Isaac's head.

He grinned, baring his teeth with misplaced bravado. "More of a shame if the Nexus need to find themselves a new delivery boy, don't you think?"

Isaac's smile grew broad. "Let's get one thing straight, I don't work for the Nexus. I'm a contractor."

"Big difference—"

"And secondly, I've dropped off cargo at this joint enough times to know exactly where to park my ship, and it took precisely one trip to your—" He gestured the room with both hands, grimacing, "fine establishment to get a long-range sniper installed right on Stella's prow. Stella, sweetheart? Would you light up my friend here?"

The manager opened and closed his mouth, gabbling incomprehensible words. Over the sound of his spluttering, Stella's withering sigh crackled in Isaac's ear. A second later, a red dot flickered all over the manager's head, settling on the bridge of his nose.

He froze.

"You guys should consider the layout of this place." Isaac leant back on his heels, gesturing with a relaxed wave of his hand. "A bar in direct line with the entrance, and with the shipyard right outside?" He tutted. "Sloppy."

"You've made your point," the manager whispered.

"Have I?" Isaac lowered his gaze to the pistol.

Slowly, the manager placed the gun on the counter and took a step backwards, raising his hands.

From the auction floor, the broker's voice cut through the tension. "Fifty. I've got fifty. Can I get fifty-five?"

Isaac's heart sped up. How easy it would be to torture a man who came across a little girl in an escape pod and stuck her in a cage instead of finding help. "Stella..." He dragged out the word, enjoying the way the manager convulsed in fear.

But she knew him too well and seemed in no mood to play along with his ruse. "Nope. I'm not shaking this guy down because you got sentimental in your old age."

The red light blinked out, and the Ignite fell backwards against the shelves, hands pressed to his chest. He panted, struggling to get his breath back.

The auctioneer's voice carved across his spluttering. "Sixty. Sixty credits. Can I get sixty-five?"

Isaac folded his arms. "Old? At thirty-nine? I got at least a hundred more good years in me."

"Not when you drink yourself to death."

"Sixty-five. Any more takers?"

Isaac snapped his arm over the counter. He raised his eyebrows at the manager, who'd straightened up, pretending he hadn't almost pissed himself caught in a bluff. And when he hesitated too long, Isaac snapped his fingers.

"Going once at sixty-five credits."

The manager cleared his throat and picked up his tablet.

"Wallet," he said gruffly.

"Going twice."

Isaac angled his wrist console towards the manager, sensors facing up. The Ignite heaved a strained sigh as he swiped his finger along his tablet screen in Isaac's direction.

"Seventy-five credits," he said through gritted teeth. "And don't ever come back."

The wrist console beeped to confirm the transfer.

"Sold to—"

"Seventy credits!" Isaac's voice boomed through the auction house.

The auctioneer turned to stare, his startled pause pierced only by Stella's expletive-laden rant in Isaac's ear. He tapped his earpiece to mute her as he strode towards the stage. The auctioneer raised his eyebrows, eyeing Isaac up and down, but Isaac's focus was solely on the girl. She knelt on the floor of her cage, grazed hands clasped around the bars, her face pressed against the steel.

Her hazel eyes bored into him.

The auctioneer wasn't wrong. This girl stood out. The sort of kid you'd see in luxury resort advertisements on Lux, playing on pristine

beaches with a picture-perfect family of tanned, blonde-haired, green-eyed people.

Isaac found it hard to break away from her intense gaze in order to lock eyes with the auctioneer.

“Seventy credits?” the balding man said, raising one eyebrow.

“Seventy.”

Isaac clenched his jaw, conscious of his pulse thumping his neck. His fingers twitched towards his holster. Each second seemed to stretch to hours, with the girl’s gaze growing painful.

“Seventy credits.” The auctioneer bowed his head. “Can I get eighty?”

His eyes darted across the room to the deepest shadows, where a man stood shrouded in smoke, leaning against a wall. A rosette of embers flourished in the darkness before another puff of smoke swirled around him.

Isaac stared hard, a nerve twitching in his temple. Seventy credits was a problem, but ninety credits was... a more complicated problem. He brushed his thumb against his pistol’s grip. Bad day to set out half-armed.

After too long a moment, the shadowy man waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. Isaac exhaled a long breath, a hundred thoughts clamouring for his attention—foremost among them, ‘This isn’t your money you’re spending, pal. You realise what comes next, don’t you?’

But one look at the kid and all thoughts snuffed out. She still clung to the bars, staring at him with all the intensity of an anti-matter reactor, a complete lack of understanding blazing out of her perfect face. The sort of face innocence was made of.

Isaac nodded to himself, stifling a panicked laugh. This was the right decision. It was also the crazy decision, but not his craziest. Not by a long shot.

As the kid’s cage lifted off the stage, hoisted towards the holding area, Isaac caught the auctioneer’s gaze and raised his chin in silent demand.

“Settle up at the bar,” the man said, his eyes narrowing, “then she’s all yours, Terran.”

Isaac shoved between the crowds, who'd scuttled out of the shadows at the sight of the next cage being hoisted onto the stage. Inside, a young woman huddled in the corner, arms wrapped around her naked flesh. Isaac's shoulders heaved as he forced his way through the baying crowds, trying to remind himself he was one man. He couldn't save everyone in the Skyfield.

Most days, he couldn't even save himself.

"Back so soon?" The manager's voice drawled as Isaac stomped up to the counter, his wrist extended.

He forced a smile, though it burned. "Oh, you know me, darlin'. Can't resist your dulcet charms."

The manager bared his teeth and swept his tablet off the counter.

"Lot three-eighty." He tapped at his device. A wide-eyed little face filled the screen. He raised one eyebrow. "Convenient price."

Isaac shrugged one shoulder.

But the guy persisted. "I thought you said these were Nexus credits?"

"There's a whole galaxy of credits out there, pal." Isaac rocked on his heels. "Say, uh, could you hurry this along? I gotta step outside, check my moral fibres. Feels like they're starting to fray. You know what I mean?"

The manager's eyes narrowed to slits.

Isaac flashed a roguish smile. "Yeah, I figured you might."

Muttering under his breath, the manager slammed the tablet down on the bar. The kid's biometrics filled the screen, most of them blank—no historical data to pull from any wearables. An unknown in every way.

"Wallet." More a threat than an instruction.

Isaac scanned his wrist console across the tablet. It beeped in disappointment as the healthy contents of his credit account drained away mere minutes into the black. Without another glance at the manager, he turned and walked away.

"Not so righteous now, huh?"

Isaac stopped mid-stride. Shoulders hunched, he turned and

stared into the manager's smug eyes, then flicked his wrist dismissively. "Oh, the girl?"

The Ignite's smile curled into a leer. "Got big plans?"

Isaac crossed his arms and let the silence pile up between them. He enjoyed watching the swagger drain out of the guy's face, replaced by pale unease. Silence could be so eloquent sometimes.

"The problem with you Terrans," the manager said, bristling, "is you think being tall gives you the right to look down on everyone else. But you got nothing. When you joined the Skyfield, you brought no new tech, no cultural wonders, no innovations—nothing. You latecomers thrived off the rest of us for centuries. Parasites. But you have the balls to think you're somehow better than us?"

Isaac looked the guy over, slowly, his half-smile saying everything his silence did not.

Mirroring his pose, the manager folded his arms. He glowered. "Well? I'm waiting. What did Terra ever contribute to the Skyfield?"

Isaac didn't rush to answer. He scanned the bottles crammed on uneven shelves behind the bar, then sighed, long and loud. "Well, there's whiskey, for one." Shrugging, he locked gaze with the manager. "And Santa Claus."

The manager scoffed, shaking his head. "Pathetic. The Skyborn were assholes, but at least they gave your insignificant rock a purpose when they blew it to pieces."

Out on the auction floor, the tense bidding war boiled over into a brawl. Traders piled into a free-for-all of punches and feral yells, snagging the manager's attention. As he barked orders at his security team, Isaac retreated inside himself, counting off the seconds, refusing to think; refusing to let this small-minded man bring the past crashing down on top of him.

With calm restored, the manager threw a nervous glance Isaac's way, his jowls quivering in anticipation of a retaliation he knew he'd earned. Isaac let him stew a moment longer, then took a long stride, right up to the bar. The manager recoiled, colliding with a shelf of glassware in a tuneless clatter.

“Is that Linear Brown you got there?” Isaac jerked his chin at a grease-coated bottle.

When the manager blinked, Isaac snapped his fingers and pointed.

“Uh... yeah.” The guy placed the bottle on the counter, then darted back as if it might explode.

Isaac snatched it up, examining the label through the grime. Seemed authentic enough. He popped the stopper and sniffed. The sharp, almost brutal scent of aged spirits hit him hard—more acidic than he liked, but drinkable. Even bad Brown was better than no Brown; needed to make sure the ghosts this asshole dredged up stayed buried.

He took a swig, the liquor scorching his throat, and started towards the back door.

The manager’s feeble protest chased him. “You gotta pay for that.”

But Isaac didn’t look back.

At the entrance to the holding area, a security guard stopped him with a deep growl. Another off-worlder. Noxian, no doubt about it. Few humans in the Skyfield grew taller than Terrans, and few humans in the Skyfield smelt worse than the Noxians.

Holding his breath, Isaac waved his wrist over the scanner by the door. The cracked screen pinged up the little girl’s sales receipt, and the guard stepped aside with an approving grunt. Isaac ducked inside a dark warehouse, lined with cages.

He stumbled a few paces, adjusting to the dim light. The air tasted stale, and a rank odour—old sweat and unwashed bodies—rivalled the Noxian outside. Isaac took another swig of the Brown and squinted into the dark, unnerved by the stillness. A place like this had no right being this quiet; none of these cages were empty. Gaunt faces peered out of the bars.

A security guard, his uniform hanging loosely on his scrawny frame, stepped out from the shadows. “Collections?” He gestured down an aisle lined with cages.

Nodding, Isaac stoppered the bottle of Brown and pushed it into

the guy's hands, "Tell your boss we're even," then set off through the forest of metal bars.

He didn't look too closely. Only one face he needed to find, and he was sure he'd find her up ahead, at the end of the row, where bright light spilled in from the auction room, cutting through the gloom. Rowdy voices swelled outside, more animal than human. A security guard watched the bidding war, leaning against the opening with idle indifference.

Isaac ignored the guy, his attention snagged by a pair of wide eyes, peering out of a nearby cage. He jogged over, eager to get out of here before he made a stupid decision. Smiling, he stopped beside the cage and stared at the little girl, who craned her neck to fix her unblinking gaze on his.

Alright, *another* stupid decision

"Hey, kid." He nodded at her.

No response.

"What's your name?"

She stared.

"I'm Isaac." He pressed his hands to his chest, hoping for some sort of acknowledgment.

But there was none.

Okay, straight to business.

"You ready to get out of here?"

Isaac swiped his wrist across a control panel, and with a click and a whirr, the door slid open. The girl didn't move, her fingers still wrapped around the bars, knuckles white.

"Uh..." Isaac leant inside, peering around the open door. "You coming, kid?"

Slowly, the little girl peeled away from the bars and stared at him, no sign of comprehension in her wide eyes and slack expression.

"Come on." Isaac beckoned her with a jerk of his head. "Let's go."

But she just stared, as if she didn't understand a word out of his mouth. Maybe she didn't. Isaac rubbed his neck. What had that

auctioneer said? No planetary artefacts in her DNA linking her to one of the hundreds of worlds in the Skyfield.

Every few years, people way smarter than him found ways to reactivate dormant Star Lanes, opening up access to long-forgotten worlds seeded by the Skyborn in the days when gods, not sadists, ruled the Skyfield.

Maybe this kid came from one of those worlds. Could explain why she didn't speak Standard.

Isaac heaved a deep sigh and stepped into the cage. He extended his hand to the girl, crouching down to make his towering frame less intimidating.

"It's okay," he said, trying out his warmest smile. "I'm gonna get you someplace safe, okay?"

He moved closer, his hand a few centars from hers. At last, she blinked and looked at it, no reaction registering on her face. After a long moment, she turned her head to one side. Oblivious.

Alright, Standard clearly wasn't the only translation barrier. This kid didn't understand innate human gestures. After crash-landing in an escape pod, trauma could explain her state of shock, but by the look of her, she could just as easily have escaped a medical facility.

Her grey trousers and long-sleeved shirt had a clinical feel about them, as did her bare feet, but those braids of hers looked too elaborate, even with wispy blonde hairs spilling out of them, framing her face like a halo.

A damned mystery.

One Isaac didn't have time to decipher. He cleared his throat and looped his hand through hers. He expected her to flinch, or, hell, react in some way, but she just stared at his hand, head tilted, fingers limp.

"Come on," he said, and he tightened his grip around her hand to tug her along.

She followed as he backstepped out the cage and zeroed in on the exit. At a brisk pace, Isaac led her to the service door at the back of the warehouse, gritting his teeth against the desperate voices that

chased them. No longer silent, the men and women pleaded. Only a few at first, but then a tide of despair.

“Please, I have a family. Help me.”

“Save us, kind sir. Please.”

“You gonna take care of that baby girl alone, sugar? Take me too, and I’ll never let you regret it.”

At the door, a security guard seemed to realise what would happen if she got in Isaac’s way. She stepped aside as he shouldered through the emergency escape mechanism. Stumbling into the dim alleyway outside, his chest heaved, heart pounding in his ears. He kicked the door closed, cutting off the wails and the moans, then collapsed against the wall.

For a long moment, he panted, bringing his free hand up to his forehead, balled into a fist. He ground his knuckles into his skull. So many voices, crying out. And he couldn’t help them, couldn’t do a damned thing—

Little fingers closed around his other hand.

Isaac dropped his fist and whipped around to find the girl staring at him in that blank way of hers. She gripped his hand tight. No emotion in her face, not even curiosity or fear. Here she was, caught in an objectively awful situation, but she didn’t seem to feel anything.

Isaac sighed.

“You need help, kid.”

And he knew just the place.