

PROLOGUE

The snow was deep on the shoulder of the mountain, a wide, unbroken sea of white swept by an icy wind. And Trevyn was tired, so tired of lifting his leaden legs, one after the other, to keep from drowning under those endless waves of frigid cold. He had fallen behind—again—and his father and brother refused to wait for him. In the distance they looked like fluttering black crows against the empty slope. The blood fever of the hunt was on Kylan Dar, and no one dared slow him down when he was in this mood, especially not his youngest son. Trevyn's older brother Kinnian, nearly as bloodthirsty as his sire, had no trouble keeping up.

The wind howled across the snow field like a living thing. It bit at Trevyn's face and froze the tears that ran from his stinging eyes. He tugged his hood down over his brow and trudged on, looking only at his snowshoe-bound feet.

Until he became aware that up ahead his father had stopped. He raised his head and doubled his efforts to catch up.

"There, you see?" Kylan was kneeling in the snow, pointing at the track of a paw the size of his hand. The trail led off toward a stand of stunted *nureck* trees at the edge of the snow field. Kylan stood and inclined his head in that direction. "He'll be hiding in those woods."

"Then we have him, right, Fa?" Kinnian's eyes were shining with anticipation.

“He will not be easy to kill, even so,” their father warned, checking his laze rifle. “Make sure your weapon is on the proper setting.”

Kinnian did as he was told. Trevyn carried nothing but his knife; he was too young for a laze rifle.

Trevyn tried to hide his flinch as Kylan turned to him with a look of disgust. “You! Stay out of the way. I don’t want to have to haul your bloody carcass back to your *vrama* because you were careless.”

“Yes, sir.” He said the words, and he didn’t mumble. Anything less would have earned him a beating.

--*On our mind link only from now on*, Kylan ordered as he began following the tracks toward the trees. *We need to be silent. The snow cat is as smart as he is vicious.*

Trevyn shivered, his thin body shaking with more than just the cold. He pushed himself to follow behind his father and brother, but only because he feared being left out on the bleak mountain by himself. He had no heart for the hunt; his blood did not burn to kill any creature, no matter how well armed with tooth and claw. He’d seen what a laze rifle could do, searing through flesh to shock the vital organs. Kinnian delighted in killing small things with it and always made sure to show off his handiwork to his queasy younger brother.

It was far too late to turn back now. His father had insisted he be part of this, even though his *vrama* had

objected he was too young at six circuits to be included. Kylan had responded that Trevyn was too sensitive and weak in “spirit.” Trevyn didn’t know what that meant. He only knew he didn’t want to disappoint his father. Again.

But he couldn’t grow longer legs in the space of an afternoon; his father and brother outpaced him quickly and disappeared into the copse. He pushed on, following their tracks, until the trees surrounded him.

It was quiet among the trees. Silent and still. The wind that whistled out on the snow field barely moved the high branches of the forest. Trevyn stopped to listen, but he couldn’t hear his father or brother.

Then, a sound of crackling leaves and snapping twigs—something moving fast through the brush to his right. He heard—no, *felt!*—his father’s triumph along the mindlink as the laze rifle whined. An agonized howl shattered the air as the snow cat’s body crashed into the clearing where Trevyn stood and tumbled to the forest floor. There the beast lay unmoving, eyes glazed but still breathing in shallow pants.

Kylan Dar ran into the clearing, a huge grin splitting his bearded face. “Got him, by Portal’s balls! Did you see that shot, boy?”

Trevyn, rigid with shock, forgot to answer him, but behind him Kinnian was quick enough to speak. “Well done, Fa! I shot at him and missed. He was so fast!” Kinnian sidled closer to the cat, staying out of reach of its claws. “Is he dead?”

“Not yet,” Kylan answered. He turned to Trevyn. “Get out your knife.”

Trevyn started to say no, though he never said the word to his father. He knew better than to ask why, too. He withdrew the blade from the sheath at his belt, his hands trembling.

His father loomed over him, glaring. Kylan was on the edge of fury, Trevyn could feel it through their link. His bloodlust had not been eased by the shot with the laze rifle; he was still in a murderous killing fever. And all that horrible rage could so easily fall on Trevyn’s head.

He held out the knife to Kylan, willing his hands to be still.

--*No. Kylan pointed to the snow cat. Finish him. One deep thrust below the ear at the jawline.*

Kinnian protested. “But Fa! You’re going to let that baby make the kill? Please, Fa, let me do it!”

Kylan backhanded his oldest son across the cheek, knocking him to his knees. “Be silent!” *Your brother needs to show me he is no puling coward clinging to his vrama’s skirts.* He pushed Trevyn toward the cat sprawled on the snow. *Do as I say.*

Trevyn gripped the knife in one gloved hand and crept closer to the beast. The cat lay as it had fallen, stunned by the laze fire into immobility. But what if it leapt up from the ground and grabbed him by the throat? Trevyn couldn’t control his shivering.

“For Portal’s sake, you useless cretin! End it!” His father took a step toward him, and the threat of the big man’s fist sent Trevyn scrambling to his knees by the cat’s head.

He couldn’t help it. He stretched out a hand to touch the animal’s thick fur, white marbled with dark grey, the color of clouds laden with snow. And as his fingers made contact, images slammed into his mind: a cottage deep in the uncharted woods; a woman that could have been his own *vrama*, with a gentle smile and kind eyes; children, three of them, laughing around a fireplace. But that wasn’t all; Trevyn felt the creature’s sadness, too. His regret at failing his family, at leaving them all alone in the harsh winter. His love for them, a love so deep even a boy as young as Trevyn could perceive it.

He gasped with pain and astonishment, drawing back his hand. This made no sense. How could an *animal* have such thoughts? Such feelings? And, above all, how could anyone kill such a creature?

He whirled to look at his father, but Kylan only smiled. *So you see, do you? Why we hunt the snow cat? Why he is so hard to find and to kill? Why this trophy is prized over all others among the Thrane?*

Trevyn tried to stand, to run, but Kylan was on him before he could move. His father closed his fist around Trevyn’s knife hand and plunged it deep in the creature’s neck, just below the tufted ear. Blood spurted, hot and red, over their joined hands, and the cat growled low, shuddering as his life flowed out onto

the ground. To Trevyn it seemed his father held him in place forever, forcing him to watch as the cat gave up his fight, but it couldn't have been more than a few heartbeats before the cat breathed his last. Trevyn could tell when the end came; it's easy to see when a thing no longer lives.

Kylan let go of him, and Trevyn crawled away to be violently sick in a nearby snowbank. When he had finished retching, he raised his tear-stained face to find his father staring at him with something close to hatred in his black eyes.

"If I didn't know your *vrama's* every thought," Kylan said, his voice a threatening growl, "if our bond didn't reveal her deepest secrets to me, whether she wishes it or no, I would never believe you could be my son."

He turned away, then, and he and Kinnian set about the task of cutting away the great cat's pelt, head, and paws as trophies of the hunt. Trevyn was left to shiver in his misery in the snow. For a long while he did nothing but bury his head in his arms and give in to his lonely grief. It didn't seem to matter now if he cried; his father had already cast him out of the circle of his approval. Not that he had ever really been inside that tiny space for more than an instant of time.

With the long hunt through the snow and the emotional trauma of the kill, Trevyn was exhausted. He drifted off for a time despite the cold and woke with a start, his heart pounding. His father and brother still carved away on the carcass, talking and laughing over the

bloody work, ignoring him. But something had changed in the surrounding forest, Trevyn could feel it. There was no sound but the sighing of the wind in the treetops, nothing to see but the lengthening shadows of late afternoon. Still, the silence echoed with dark energy, as though the monsters of Kinnian's cruel bedtime stories watched from the edge of the woods.

At first, he thought he was imagining it: the small, pale face staring at him from a *turo* thicket not five paces away. His mouth opened in astonishment and fear, and his head swiveled from the thicket to his father and brother in the clearing, hesitating. The face disappeared, but it seemed the evergreen branches of the spreading *turo* moved just slightly. If he shouted a warning and there was nothing in the thicket but a hare, Kylan would beat him for interrupting his work. Even worse, Kinnian would never let him forget it.

So he said nothing, but sat quietly, watching. Soon enough, the face appeared again, golden eyes the same color as the cat's flicking from Trevyn to the gruesome butchery in the clearing. The child, a girl no older than he himself, Trevyn could see now, watched for a long torturous moment, her delicate jaw clenched. Then she looked back at him, and though tears streaked her cheeks, the expression she wore was not one of sadness, or horror.

Before she turned to flee into the forest, Trevyn could feel the daughter of the slain snow cat curse him with a bottomless, fiery hatred.

CHAPTER ONE

Lael Saphora studied the readout on her nav screen for the third time in a handspan and cursed. She was being followed.

The ship trailed behind her at a discreet distance, too far to be identified. So far that it had taken her a full ship's sun to be certain. But now she was sure. The sensors had picked up the anomaly over 36 spans ago at the very edge of observable range, where it had stayed, no matter what course changes she made.

Lael's pulse quickened in response to the threat, even though it was still light-years away. Her mission was too important, the food and medical supplies she carried in the cargo containers strung out behind her little space tug were too vital to the cause. Not to mention the weapons, tucked away in their hidden storage lockers in the hull of the *Good Fortune*. And she had been *careful! Shalssit!* It simply wasn't possible that the fucking Onlys had followed her from Paradon.

The ship tracking her could be captained by pirates, of course. This sector of space was no one's territory—Minertsan, Confederated Systems, Thrane or any other—so the bloodthirsty were free to prey on the foolish at will. She had known that when she chose the route, and she had armed her tug accordingly. This wasn't her first time out, after all, and she had certain . . . alliances.

But a pirate would have caught her up long ago; blackjacks didn't waste time playing the long game. This ship was slower, patient, relentless. Like its captain had all the time in the galaxy.

What the hell does he want?

Lael had precious little fuel to spare, but she bumped the ion engines another decimal anyway. With luck the following ship's crew would be nodding at the helm and miss that she was gradually pulling away. The F2 jump node at Majis IV was within reach if she could just keep ahead of her unknown stalker.

She refused to think about what might happen if she failed to make that jump. The people waiting for her on Thrane *needed* what was stowed in her hold. This wasn't just some for-hire supply run; they were depending on her for their lives. Lael would fight to defend this cargo, but she could only afford to fight if the cargo could be secured. Until she came within range of the Majis system, she and her ungainly train of cargo containers were a line of cud-chewing *psoros*. There was no place here in the void of black space for her to hide the pods and turn to fight.

Sweating, she increased her speed another notch.

Another handspan and Lael began to think maybe her strategy was working. The Majis system would be within sensor range any moment, and she'd managed to stay ahead of the tailing ship. Fuel for the ion engines was dangerously low, but once she switched to pulse engines for the jump, that wouldn't be an issue.

She could refuel on the other side of F2, though Torpa was a dump that she usually avoided. She rolled her shoulders and started making the calculations for the jump.

Even with the aid of her comp, those calculations were complicated, which is why she missed the abrupt appearance of a second ship until the proximity alarm blared at her from her console. Perai, *must have come through the jump!* There was no time for evasion; the sleek cruiser was already within weapons range with ion cannons fully charged and aimed for her tug's bridge.

She barely got her shields up before the comm started squawking. "*TMS Good Fortune*, this is *TMS Blood's Honor* on behalf of the Interstellar Council for Abolition and Rescue. Stand down and prepare to be boarded."

Rescue? What the . . .? Lael hit the comm pad with more force than might have been necessary. "This is open space, Rescue. You have no authority here." The anti-slavers had no authority anywhere, really, but that never stopped them. Usually she applauded them for it; this time it was damned inconvenient. "And, besides, I'm carrying food and medicine, not slaves."

"Yes, I understand even slavers have to eat," the voice from the other ship drawled. "My orders are to stop and detain you."

Orders from Rescue HQ on Madras, no doubt, but this was the first Lael had heard of a Thrane Merchant Ship

and captain working for the abolitionist organization.
“And who the fuck are you?” she said finally.

“Lower your shields and invite me aboard,” came the answer. “I’ll introduce myself properly.”

The cruiser outgunned her by a considerable margin. And a glance at her sensors told her the ship on her tail had increased speed. That one would be joining the fun before she could dump her cargo and make a run for the jump node. She closed her comm and growled a long stream of creative curses. Then she leapt to her feet and began to pace, though the cockpit that served as her bridge was as confining as a cage.

The comm crackled again. “*Good Fortune*. Lower your shields. I won’t ask again.”

The wild side of her surged to the surface, and it was all she could do to keep from lunging at the Weapons panel to spray the offending ship with laze fire. Her more rational mind knew the much bigger *Blood’s Honor* would shake off her attack and squash her like a flea. Lael fought for control. She wasn’t much for talking her way out of anything, but this was one time she would have to try.

She took a breath and hit the comm pad. “All right, *Blood’s Honor*. Come aboard. But don’t expect a warm welcome.”



Trevyn Dar, Captain of the *Blood's Honor*, acknowledged receipt of the message, but didn't move from the conn of his bridge right away. There was something odd about this hunt, now that he had cornered his quarry. *He* was a *she*, for one thing. Unexpected, though not unheard of among slavers. And the ship he'd captured wasn't the usual big-bellied freighter packed from stem to stern with stinking bodies. Cargo containers were expensive to retrofit with life support for hauling slaves. In fact, his own sensors confirmed there were no slaves in the containers the *Good Fortune* was towing; the captain was telling the truth about her cargo, if you ignored the weapons she'd hidden behind the bulkheads of her tug. So, what was the real story here?

Trevyn turned to his Comms Officer. "Kara, get me the *Shadowhawk*. I need to speak with the CFO."

The young woman acknowledged the order and turned to her console. Within seconds, Trevyn saw the familiar image of Rayna Murphy, Rescue's Chief of Field Operations on his viewscreen. Her husband Sam, Captain of the *Shadowhawk*, stood with arms folded across his chest behind her.

As usual, Rayna wasted no time. "We're almost in range," she said. "You have that ship in custody?"

"I'll be boarding her momentarily," Trevyn said. "I have a few questions first."

Rayna's dark eyebrows lifted. "What kind of questions?"

“What do you know about her captain? For one thing.”

“Lael Saphora, smuggler and terrorist, among other talents,” Rayna replied with a shrug. “Why?”

“There are no slaves aboard this ship; it’s not a ship built for slave-hauling. My sensors tell me she’s carrying food and medicine.”

“You left out the weapons concealed in her hull,” Rayna said, her full mouth twisting.

“Since when did we start enforcing laws on weapons smuggling?”

“Since the weapons supplied slavers, that’s when.” Rayna blew out a breath. “We have reliable intel from the Thrane government that this woman is heavily involved in the trade. They, uh, negotiated quite a deal with Marlena Oksana for us to capture Saphora. From what I understand it was one we couldn’t pass up.”

“The *Thrane* government.” Trevyn repeated it, the words dripping with all the venom he felt toward that institution.

“Yeah, well, Oksana made the deal, I didn’t. She’s Rescue’s Director and she gets paid to know what’s best for the organization. The rest of us just get paid to do what she tells us.” Rayna was glaring at the viewscreen now, looking unhappy but resigned. Trevyn hadn’t been a part of Rescue for very long, but he had known Rayna Murphy for long enough to recognize that look.

“I understand,” he said. “I’ll have Saphora in confinement aboard *Blood’s Honor* before you arrive at these coordinates.” He cut off communication with the *Shadowhawk*’s bridge, stood up and glanced at his First Officer. “D’Lac, you have the conn. Have two security officers meet me in the D-mat room with full weapons kits. Let’s hope our prisoner doesn’t give us a fight.”