

# CHAPTER ONE

A disembodied head floated in front of me, surrounded by endless black. It screamed through purple lips, “Butcher! War criminal!” before the sound devolved into ghastly shrieks. Blood droplets the size of my fist swirled like crimson oil mixed in onyx water as my paralyzed body drifted in empty space. Sparks and metal and fire rained from above. A metallic beast tore through the atmosphere. A gun cocked nearby, *click-CLICK*.

*Click-CLICK!*

My eyes flew open. Sweat drenched my new sheets, soft pillows, and silky blankets. Shadow buried the room, aided by dark curtains and *real* windows. Only outlines of the new furniture were visible: a solid wood nightstand with a functioning datapad and electric lamp, a fine wooden dresser filled with new clothes, and a weapons rack to hold my guns, armor, and my father’s Plasma Edge.

I wiped the mop of hair out of my face. No heads. No blood. I took a deep breath and tried to relax my neck. *Butcher!*

Something clicked again. It sounded like someone was trying the handle on the front door. Edge in hand, I crept through the dark house. My elbow knocked into

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something soft and fleshy. I jumped back and pointed my Edge at the...training dummy.

*Still doesn't feel like home.* I'd secretly moved into the unit next to Fyra's parents. Fyra would knock on the back door. Kaylaa would ignore the door entirely. Someone coming to the front door meant the secret was out.

I flashed my Edge's plasma once, admiring it briefly as it bathed the room in faint cobalt blue light. "Who's there?"

"Delivery service," said a robotic voice. *Olan-Har can't order deliveries.* "Invitation from the Grand Cardinal. I knocked several times."

The Grand Cardinal? I blew off his last request. Why would he try again? Especially since he'd been on every channel sowing fear about my power and motives. He even had the Betrayal of the Hero, my father's failed rebellion and death, replayed on television, as a gruesome reminder of my evil blood. So why now?

*A trap.*

I cracked the door ajar. A gyrocopter supporting what looked like a fish head hovered at about eye level. A robotic claw hung near the door handle. My eyes searched the pitted road, the stone buildings, and the patchwork roofs. But nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

*Oh well.* I pushed open the door, and with a bright flash the delivery drone snapped a picture. I rubbed the stars out of my eyes. "The invitation?"

A rolled-up scroll, closed with the wax seal of the Grand Cardinal, slipped out of a mail slot onto a tray above the rotating blades. I plucked it out of the tray and started reading it. The drone hovered a little higher to observe, like a nosy reader over my shoulder.

"You can go now," I said, flicking my hand.

“Read receipt requested. Response requested. The client recommended I read the letter to you, if you are unable to read.”

“I can read!” *Even with an invitation, a jab.*

*Darynn Mark,*

*The Order of the Iveleen has deemed it appropriate to raise your caste to the Poor caste. Your presence is requested in a joint Lifting Ceremony with the Solia family one day from the receipt of this letter. A Lifting is a prodigious honor, and it is expected that you accept graciously.*

*Grand Cardinal Lolandell III*

*Wise Protector of Vastire and Voice for the Iveleen*

My saliva turned bitter like slum liquor. The GraCar sickened me more than even Commander Aseus. If the Iveleen truly traveled by spaceship to land on Vastire, not descended from the Heavens, then he couldn't talk to them anymore than I could talk to my dead mother. *Lying bastard.*

“Read receipt confirmed,” the drone said, adding a chime to the end of the sentence. “Your reply?”

“Just a minute!” I didn't want to play the GraCar's game. A phony caste system meant a phony ceremony. *But if it was real, then I could...*

My spirits sank just as quickly as they rose. It didn't matter.

The GraCar, the caste system, my caste...none of it mattered now. The Iveleen had a secret, a Great Secret, and it was up to me—up to us—to learn the truth. That meant traveling to planet Yiptae, the origin of Their hidden ship, and finding the clue that my father found five years ago. The faster we found it, the more lives we could save from the greedy jaws of these slums.

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*What was Kaylaa waiting on?* She said she would make the escape plan, but she was taking so long. She only gave me two tasks: stay out of trouble and don't tell anyone about Yiptae. The frustration from having to just *wait* sizzled in my brain like it was in a frying pan.

“Your reply?” repeated the drone, pulling me back to the present.

I held up my hand and skimmed over the GraCar's letter again. The Solias getting Lifted would mean something. Poor caste would allow them to get different jobs, live in other places, travel. They would get access to the DataAxis. If I didn't go, then maybe he would cancel.

All of that was irrelevant though. There was only one factor that mattered: it would be important to Fyra, who remained faithful in the face of doubt. I looked up to the sky, as if the Iveleen smirked at me from above.

I sighed. “If the Solias said yes, count me in.”

“Response received.” It chimed again, then the gyrocopter blades whined and the drone soared into the cloudless blue sky. It turned to the south, toward Ziphyr, the Grand Cathedral, and the Grand Cardinal.

I kicked the door closed and plopped down on a new, navy-blue chair that was pushed all the way to the corner. The seat still surprised me when it sprung back. The rest of the room was empty, except for the scratched-up dummies. As a training facility, it was barely passable, but it was more useful than a living room.

I leaned back in the chair. Fyra discouraged me from taking gifts, or at least pressured me to donate them, but I kept a few things anyway. *I deserved it, right?*

*Four hundred twenty-seven.*

The number echoed through my head like a ghost whispering in my ear. Most of my memory of the assault on the embargo was blocked by blinding circles, like I'd

stared at Windoon's Star too long. The twisted bodies, the severed limbs, the screaming faces lingered. The feelings of power and dominance, the sheer terror I invoked, overwhelmed my visual memories. I jerked my head from side-to-side, hoping the number would slip out of my ear.

It never worked.

Then I remembered: Fyra and I had plans today.

I sprang from the chair and snatched my new Mark 19 Revolver off the counter. The weapon smith who gifted it to me had taken extra time to outfit this revolver with a superacid vial over the barrel and a method to fill the casings, like a later generation revolver or Acid Pistol. Master Makai probably told him my first gun was a Mark 19, but it shot projectiles, so swapping to superacid modernized it. I holstered the gun, rubbing the smooth wood beneath my fingers, and slipped out the back door into the shared courtyard.

I'd trimmed away some of the foliage and added a shoddy birdhouse, hoping to find serenity in this garden. But any peace I felt was pierced as easily as the courtyard by sunlight. *All of those people suddenly robbed of their lives in a cruel way.* But I didn't have a choice.

*Right?*

I knocked twice then pushed through the Solias' back door. Fyra and her mother Lia chattered excitedly on the sofa, while her father Makaro absently munched on something at the rickety table. The conversation was mostly one-sided—Lia had withdrawn more and more everyday since Pavlar died.

Fyra jumped up and threw her arms around me. A soft electric shock trickled down my spine. "Did you get your letter too?"

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Her sapphire eyes sparkled with joy, which was almost enough to energize me about the Lifting. *I don't want to take that away.* “Yeah. You excited?”

She held my hand and twirled, a wide smile stretching across her lips. Her platinum hair and green dress swung around her, revealing her pale, slender legs. The end of the embargo had transformed her. She had more color in her face. The bags under her eyes had mostly disappeared. She was generally happier.

*Helps not dreaming of death every night.*

“I don't remember the last time they held a Lifting Ceremony! The Middle Caste! Can you believe it?”

“Middle?” I cocked my head. “Poor, you mean.”

“No, it definitely said Middle. Here, look.” She took the letter off the table and showed it to me. Every word was exactly the same as mine, except it did say ‘Middle Caste.’

“That bastard.” I licked my teeth. She raised her eyebrows, patiently waiting for me to explain. “He's raising you to Middle and me only to Poor. I knew it was too good to be true. That lying *bastard!*” I crumpled up the letter, dropped it to the floor, and stomped on it.

Makaro chuckled but quickly stifled it with his meaty hand. My mouth opened to snap at him, but Fyra pressed a finger over my lips. “I'm sure it was just an oversight, Darynn.” I glanced at her incredulously. She was fully aware of the bile he'd been flooding the DataAxis with. “He hasn't heard your side of the story because you never went to see him.”

“Don't put this on me. I'm the one that ended the damn embargo!”

She started to say something, and stopped herself short, like pinching a balloon closed before it could exhale. Just like every other time the embargo came up. Whatever it was, she was too afraid to say it. And I was too scared to find out. *Four hundred twenty-seven.*

“Y-Y-You *are* going to go, right?”

“No! It’s just meaningful—” She pressed both hands against my lips. Makaro raised an eyebrow.

“Keep it to yourself until *after* Yiptae. We discussed this, remember?” she whispered.

I sighed. Every day we stayed on this planet, it was harder to contain the Iveleen’s secret. Her soft, caring eyes pleaded with me. I took a breath and exhaled through clenched teeth. “I’ll still go. But he’s going to explain this.”

“Fair.” She smiled, and my anger started to melt away. Her joy alone almost made it all worth it. “What will I wear? I don’t have anything worthy! Every Lord and Lady in Vastire will be there, with the Grand Cardinal, of course.” Ever since she let slip that she was into the tabloids, she’d spoken freely about the Lords and Ladies of Vastire. The selection of a new P.A. Senator was apparently interesting, and from there she dived into serious politics. “And it’s tomorrow!”

“That’s another thing,” I said. “Not even a full day’s notice?”

“He wants to get it out of the way before the Wyn’Iveleen starts. Or maybe he’ll kick it off with the Lifting? Everyone of importance will already be in town for it.”

Visions of the upcoming celebration whirled through my head: massive parades, fireworks, fairs, parties, and church services, all to celebrate five hundred years since the Rise of the Iveleen. “He wants to use the Lifting for one news cycle, then cover it up with a huge celebration.”

Fyra glared at me.

Then Makaro butted in as he raised up from his chair. He’d gotten fatter. “Who cares? A Lifting...for us! We deserve it. I know a tailor in town that’ll take care of clothes.”

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“We can’t afford that,” Lia said, barely audible.

“They’ll all want to make clothes for us, so they can say it on the TV.” He waved his open palm in front of his chest. “Clothes by Agio, dress by Verna, underwear by Jarit Mear.”

I snickered.

“That doesn’t mean we should take them,” Fyra said. *Time for this argument again.* But it was true—I didn’t have anything to wear to a Lifting either. Images of climbing the Grand Cathedral’s steps in my armor, Plasma Edge blazing, pasted a smirk on my lips.

“Maybe it’s okay, just this once honey,” Lia said.

Fyra rubbed her healed shoulder as she considered it and reluctantly agreed. “You can go on without me. Take one of my dresses for size. Nothing too fancy. Darynn and I have plans today.”

My heart rose with the thought of spending the day just with Fyra. “Shall we?” I held out my hand.

She stuffed a blaster, smaller than her hand, in a pocket below her belt. She had fought us every step of the way, but Kaylaa and I convinced her she needed to at least know how to shoot. She was famous now.

She looked at my extended hand longingly, but decided against taking it and opened the front door. A little disappointed, I scanned for any signs of trouble outside, but nothing looked out of the ordinary. As we walked south, I asked, “You really think there is anything at Heavensfall?”

“No,” she said, “but there’s a chance. I’d like to see it before we leave, at least.” The Iveleen were first sighted at the place now called Heavensfall. I’d never been either, even though it was practically on the way to my childhood home of Cax-Ark-Uhn.

We had a practiced route for heading south, sticking to alleys, narrow gaps, and shadows of large buildings. Better to stay out of the open, Kaylaa always warned. I



liked this way better anyway: crowds of well-wishers, and maybe not-so-well-wishers, would ambush me otherwise.

Even with the embargo gone, a lot was still the same in the slums. Though the Olan-Har were livelier, everyone was still only a few missed meals away from death. Street peddlers sold fresh-cooked meats, seamstresses displayed their hand sewn clothes on makeshift mannequins, traders marketed a whole variety of odds and ends. Roasted meat and sweet fruits filled my nose and made my mouth water.

But something felt *off*.

We walked into a deserted part of town where yellow and green vines crept over the crumbling buildings and crossed the street like a woven fiber blanket. There should have been at least a few people walking through here, but there was no one. Wind rustled the leaves of the vines and stuffed the unfamiliar scent of rosemary into my nostrils.

Several sets of footsteps quickly shuffled in behind us.

Before I could turn, a Biolon at least two heads taller than me blocked our way. Its skin was bright green like a leaf of spinach, fixed jade eyes sat over an ovular mouth, and leaves trailed down its back instead of hair.

I checked over my shoulder—three aliens, each from a different planet, stood behind me brandishing crude weapons. Blue skin and thin fur gave one away as a Yiptaen.

“No autographs today,” I said with a half-smile.

The Biolon groaned, a deep sound like rubbing bark together. Then it said in a raspy voice that sounded like rustling leaves, “This is about revenge, Mark.” Its breath was scented with powerful rosemary.

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“I’ve always wondered...would your hair wilt in jail? No sunlight and all.” I snuck a glance at our surroundings. *Something shifted on the rooftop.*

Another groan. “I had fellow cuttings on those ships!”

I dropped the smile. “I didn’t want...that...to happen. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Neither do we.” It pointed a leafy hand at me. “Know, Darynn Mark, that the Fallen’s Vengeance was your executioner!”

Two clicks reported from the rooftops. I tackled Fyra; she grunted as I flattened her to the ground.

Two laser shots intersected where my head had been, lighting up the area with a red flash.

I gathered my legs beneath me and sprung backwards into the small crowd. I held my Revolver at the Yiptaen’s Temple and my Edge out wide.

“Cowards!” I yelled. “If you want revenge, then fight me!”

Their hands trembled as they pointed their shoddy guns, notched blades, and blunt clubs at me. I spun slowly in a circle, smiling. *Been a while since my last real fight.* Time to put those skills Master Makai and Kaylaa had taught me to use.

“We can take him!” yelled a particularly hairy Yiptaen.

“He killed four hundred in minutes,” said a long-legged Shravek, covered in small spikes.

“Four hundred twenty-seven!” I snapped. “You don’t think I can take on twelve of you?”

The Yiptaen found a bit of courage and charged me, swinging her sword wildly. Her technique was worse than twelve-year-old me. I disarmed her quickly and any excitement from having a real fight dropped to the ground with her sword.

“Is anyone here actually a soldier?” A wolf-like alien shuffled two quick steps at me. I fired two shots at his

(or her?) feet. The ground sizzled as the acid ate through the vines, and the alien backed away. “Is that really it?”

“Stop antagonizing them, Darynn,” Fyra said, even as she pointed her small blaster at the Biolon. “You just make more enemies that way.”

“Hmph,” said the Biolon. “We will get our revenge, in this season or the next.” The group scattered like ants from a kicked pile.

Fyra glared at me as I holstered my weapons. “What? I didn’t even hurt any of ‘em!”

She sighed. “Let’s just get to the bus stop.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets and followed her. What was she so mad about? They attacked me, not vice versa. That was their choice. I didn’t choose for my father to start a rebellion, causing me to fall to Olan-Har. I didn’t choose for my genes to be manipulated, or to be Aseus’s weapon. The P.A. let the Olan-Har die by the thousands. Commander Aseus forced my hand with the embargo by threatening Fyra.

I was about to complain when I realized we’d left Hargonla and reached the bus stop. We took two seats off the back of the bus, knowing that we, like any other Olan-Har, wouldn’t be welcome inside.

“Pretty gentle, for a bus,” I said with a smile, trying to lighten the mood. I didn’t want our day to be ruined.

“Mhmm,” she said. *She’s mad.*

It took nearly an hour to reach the place, which swarmed with Vastirian tourists. We hopped off the bus in front of a building that reminded me of a church, except cheap and flimsy. *Seems appropriate.* A tall wooden fence stretched far to either side, meaning this building was the only entrance.

“Better get back on that bus, boy,” a Militia man said, pointing an Acid Pistol at us. “No Olan-Har without a priest.” *Because the Scriptures disallow it.* And the Scriptures might just be made up.

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“I told you we should’ve brought Father Ckoost,” Fyra said.

*Yeah, because he would’ve let us look for clues to see if the Iveleen were real or not.*

“Haven’t recognized me yet?” I asked the soldier.

His eyes widened. “Darynn Mark?” He gulped. “Still, no Olan-Har. Lord Searon’s explicit orders!”

*Damn royals.* Lord Searon of Ziphyr had a reputation for being one of the most ruthless Virin-leen. “Why don’t you go get his permission then?”

“I...I...” he stammered.

“Now!” I yelled in his face, the shaky barrel of his Acip stuck in my chest.

As I’d hoped, he retreated into the building, presumably to make the call. Not that we were going to wait for it.

I led Fyra to the fence, and with two solid kicks, opened up a hole big enough for us to go through. I tried to hold her hand as she stepped through the opening, but she refused it.

Once inside the fence, she said, “This is not how I expected this day to go.”

*Me too.*

We walked around a wooden building immediately in front of us and joined a crowd on a path presumably to the site where Josar first spoke to the Vastirian people. Nothing about the dusty plain seemed special at this point, and everything was cheapened by the vendors selling fake Iveleen Artifacts and trinkets.

The crowd started to fan out and we pushed our way to the front. Everyone seemed too entranced by the site to notice me.

The primary feature was a crater lined with cracks that looked like sparkling veins of gold revealed by an earthquake. The surface of the shallow pit shined like

black obsidian, allowing the gold to stand out all the more.

But that was it.

A speaker mounted to a pole nearby shouted at us. I recognized the Grand Cardinal's voice and my mouth dried into a desert. "Before you lay the marvelous Heavensfall, where the Iveleen flew from the Heavens to save our souls. You stand in the very spot where Josar turned the insolent man into a wildcat. 'For We are here to tame your tongues,' Josar said. Never forget how They rescued us from chaos, lest you will fall."

*Or how they tricked us into worshipping them.* It was easy for me to imagine the Yiptaen ship landing, or maybe even crashing, here in this crater, though it seemed a little big for a ship as small as the *Castroika*. Then the twelve Iveleen stepped out and amazed onlookers with their awesome power. All the while, they distracted dazed Vastirians from the spaceship.

But the ship only held seven. And the Iveleen weren't blue-skinned like Yiptaens. And...so many unresolved questions that my father found answers to on Yiptae.

I shook my head. No point in racking my brain when the only solution was to actually go to Yiptae ourselves.

The crowd began to disperse. "Where did you want to look?" I asked Fyra.

She pointed to a structure on the opposite side of the crater. "I think that is the archives building. Many handwritten accounts of people who were there that day are stored in that building. I thought one of them may have a clue, even if the viewer didn't realize it."

"You think maybe one of them wrote, 'I saw a spaceship,' and—"

"Stop. You're making assumptions again."

"And you're being willfully..." Her narrowed eyes encouraged me to let that thought trail off. With a huff,

she started for the other side of the crater. Shaking my head, I followed her.

Part of me genuinely hoped we would find something here, or more likely on Yiptae, that invalidated everything we found in the Temple. I still wanted to blame Them for everything that had happened. Fyra still believed, and that was almost good enough for me.

*Almost.*

When we reached the other side, we noticed that everyone had stopped moving. Instead they stood with their necks craned, glued to the nearest television screen. We joined the deathly silent crowd at the edge. I instantly felt tension strung along everyone's shoulders.

Images of a smoking, charred palace played on the screen. "An attack at the Wyn'Iveleen Ball in Gryphodon killed sixty seven Virin-leen today and wounded dozens of others. A bomb exploded inside the building, collapsing the roof and part of the mountain onto the unsuspecting guests. Among the dead are," and then it rattled off some names that Fyra probably recognized.

The crowd was overcome by gasps, whispering, and choked sobs. Tears even escaped from Fyra's eyes, which caused my stomach to turn. How could she mourn the Virin-leen, who abandoned the Olan-Har during the embargo? Every major house had enough money to provide for Hargonla for a year, at least. But they didn't.

"This just in! The bomb almost certainly had to be of magic origin. The Shards on the scene told us they have identified..." The speaker paused. "Darynn Mark as a person of interest."

Terrified faces fell on me, accompanied by pointed, trembling fingers. They huddled closer together, hoping for strength in numbers like a school of fish.

JUSTIN DOYLE

My knees buckled as I staggered backward, the weight of their stares pushing me away. It felt like a boxer had punched me in the throat as I struggled for breath.