

Chapter One

The Fugitive

I stood in the shadows under the trees, waiting for my target. He always took this route to his illegal alcohol still hidden deep in the forest. When he had enough aged and ready in wooden kegs, he brought a small cart to haul it with. Today, he wouldn't have it. I know, because I've been watching him for a long time.

Jannus Boggs not only ran his very illegal still in the woods, he was also wanted for arriving in the colonies without paying his immigration fees, and applying for Imperial employment. Naughty, naughty. The Agency sent me to catch him, knowing I was the best in the business at rounding up those who chose not to follow the law.

Jannus Boggs was a telepath.

Telepaths read minds like most folks read books. That's what made them so bloody difficult to catch. They knew exactly where a bounty hunter lurked in waiting. Following him wasn't easy. Most often, I took the form of a bird of prey, following him from up high. Distance cancelled out his ability to read my thoughts while my raptor's eyes saw him clearly.

Today, however, I stood in the forest, nibbling leaves. My deer's sensitive ears heard him before he came close enough to read my location. The light breeze brought his scent to me. *Getting close now.* I quieted my thoughts, centered my mind into that of my deer. Dropping into a light trance, I let only a deer's limited thinking into the forefront of my mind. *Food, eat, food, danger? Food, what sound? Danger? No danger, food, eat, food.*

Jannus drew closer, his measured walking the same. He didn't read me. By utilizing only a deer's sense of hearing and smell, I knew exactly where he was. *Food, eat, food.*

He came around a bend in the road, startling my deer. I jumped—*danger, danger*—but didn't flee. He glanced at me, then walked on. *Food, eat, danger?* Three steps past me, then four, five, then six. His back was to me now.

In an eyeblink, I changed forms. From a slender deer with sticks for legs, I shifted into a tiger large enough to take down a bull minotaur. One

handy thing about tigers, or all big cats, is their ability to leap and take down their victim in a heartbeat. Keeping my razor-sharp claws retracted, as I didn't want to hurt Jannus, I hit him hard in the back.

Jannus, like most telepaths, was not a very big fellow. A bi-ped with an overly large skull, large pointed ears, and long arms that always seemed to dangle halfway to the ground, he went down under me with a wail of terror. Careful not to crush him under my massive weight, I put one paw in between his shoulder blades to keep him still.

"Hello, Jannus," I said cheerfully. "I'm Cat. I hope I didn't hurt you. You okay?"

"What is this?" he cried, near tears. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm a bounty hunter," I said. "I'm employed by the Agency to hunt down folks who haven't paid their fees. Like you, honey."

His wailing grew louder, and sobs hitched in his chest. I grew concerned. "Jannus? Listen, I'm going to let you up, but I'll have to restrain you, okay? I don't want to hurt you."

Through his sobs and cries, he babbled. "Please let me go. I can't afford the fees. I'm begging you, don't take me. I have children to feed, please let me go. Please!"

"Jannus, honey, I can't. The laws are what they are. I'm going to change forms now and let you up. You'll behave for me, right?"

Altering my shape into the one I was born with, a human-type female, I kept my grip on his arm in case he tried to make a run for it.

"Sorry, Jannus," I said, meaning it. "I know some of these laws suck, but there are government aid agencies to help indigent folks."

He stared up at me with his bulbous yet beautiful amber eyes still wet with his tears. "What aid?" he asked, his tone bitter. "That 'aid' you talk so freely about turns you into a virtual slave, working for next to nothing for years. The fees and the fines cost more than I would make working for the Imperials in ten years."

Pulling my restraints from my leather belt, I fastened his arms behind his back. I hated this aspect of my job most. Taking into custody people whose only crime was coming to this planet in the hopes of taking advantage of its wealth of resources. Most could pay the immigration fees, and legally took jobs in the Imperial companies across the world. Others,

like Jannus, couldn't afford the high cost, and tried to evade bounty hunters like me while scratching a living outside the government's reach.

Unfortunately, the Imperial government had arms longer than a telepath's.

"Are you afraid of flying?" I asked.

Jannus, miserable, shook his head.

As I caught Jannus nearly two thousand miles from the Agency headquarters where I worked, and all bounty hunters brought their catches there for processing, I didn't care to walk him back, or utilize the government's transport system. Changing my form into a huge griffin, I spread my wings and reared back on my powerful lion's haunches. Grasping Jannus gently around his waist with my front talons, I leaped into the air and caught the wind.

He was small, weighing less than a malnourished child. Up and up I climbed, my wings beating strongly. Higher, where I caught a strong tailwind, and soared, keeping an eye on Jannus in case he grew airsick.

"How many kids do you have?" I asked, hoping to keep things light between us.

"Four," he answered. "Now they'll starve without me. Because of *you*."

"Hey, now," I protested. "I'm only doing my job. Where are they? I'll make sure they're cared for."

His thin hair streaming in the wind we made, he stared up into my face. "Why would you do that? You Imperials care nothing for the people on this world."

"I'm not an Imperial," I replied, my tone neutral. No point in getting into a philosophical argument with him. "I just work for them. The government's laws state they can't make children under a certain age pay the fees or work until they reach their majority. I know people who will take them in, feed and educate them, if you can't. When you get your fees paid, look me up and I'll get them back to you."

"Who will pay for all that?"

I took my eyes from his. "The charity organization will shoulder some of it."

"And the rest?"

"Me."

At his silence, I glanced down. Jannus stared at the ground passing by at high speed as though mesmerized. Being a telepath, he knew that I spoke the truth. Simple folks, and honest, most telepaths didn't use their huge brains to invade people's thoughts unless asked or forced to. They made excellent interrogators, and the government employed thousands upon thousands of them across the world in hundreds of capacities. Jannus, himself, had he come here legally, would have found a high paying job almost immediately. As he didn't pay his fees upon arrival, they now doubled. On top of that, he faced another huge fine and possible time in prison for his still.

Should they discover it, that was. I certainly had no obligation to inform them of his extracurricular activities. Nor will I.

"Why would you do that?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have to. He was only being polite in asking, as he already knew my reasons.

"Thank you, Cat," he said simply. "You're a good person. I'll stop reading your thoughts now."

"Where are your children?"

"In a cave about ten miles along the road from where you caught me."

"The orphanage is managed by the Temple of the Sun," I said. "The monks and nuns there run a school for all species of kids, and will make sure they have all they need. Between their donations and what I contribute, your kids can stay there for years without risk of being put out for lack of funding."

"I've heard of them," Jannus said. "Good people, angels mostly. How soon can you get them to the Temple? My children have only enough food for a day or two."

"Tomorrow morning with luck and a good tailwind."

He sighed as though a great load had been taken from him. "Now I can face my crimes knowing at least I'll see them again one day."

"Being poor is hardly a crime."

Jannus laughed, a bitter sound. "Oh, yes, it is, Cat. It certainly is."

“Hey, Caterina,” called my boss as I walked into the buzzing hive the Agency called home. “Who you got there?”

Chief Superintendent of the Fugitive Task Force, Wen Hauser, emerged from his office leading with his big belly. A member of the werewolf clans, Hauser made excellent use of his skills as a tracker to not just rise to his current rank, but also to teach younger up and coming hunters the innate tools they needed to succeed in catching fugitives.

“Jannus Boggs,” I replied as the Chief inspected Jannus, using his keen sense of smell to closely examine him. Jannus turned his face away.

“A telepath,” Hauser said. He looked around the massive office. “Walker!”

“Chief?”

“Take this fellow to processing. Caterina, fill out your forms immediately. I have another target for you.”

“Right, Chief.”

As Walker, nodding politely to me, came to take Jannus, I removed Jannus’s restraints. Putting my hand on his shoulder, I murmured, “Good luck, honey.”

Jannus didn’t answer, but went with Walker obediently enough. I watched him vanish into the depths of the crowded room, the fifty-odd number of people sitting at desks, talking on their communicators, bringing in or taking out prisoners, interrogating still others. Yet, this was only a small portion of the Imperial Immigration Agency I worked for. Housed in a building shaped like a five pointed star and reconstructed from the ancient days, the Agency filled the entire huge building and spilled over into neighboring structures.

Using the electronic tablet at the main counter, I filled out the details of where and how I caught Jannus, what he was wanted for, and my personal identification information. If I didn’t fill this out, I didn’t get paid. A telepath got me double, four gold marks, due to the fact they were so difficult to catch.

Finishing my paperwork, I walked to Hauser’s office and knocked on the jamb. Without looking up from his tablet, he gestured for me to enter and sit down.

“This one is going to be tough,” he said.

“What can be tougher than an empath?”

He finally glanced up, his golden wolf's eyes intent. "A dragon-shifter."

I sagged back into the chair. "Oh."

"Fortunately for us," he said, turning the tablet to me, "there aren't many dragon-shifters coming to our world. Those buggers are just too effing dangerous. Most of them who do come pay their fees without incident."

"I guess this one didn't."

"Afraid not." Hauser folded his hands on his desk. "Bringing this one in will take brains, Caterina. Not even brutes like the minotaurs, or the winged lions can force a dragon into restraints without being roasted alive. If a basilisk could turn him to stone without killing, that would be ideal. But their stare is lethal as you know. Dead dragons can't pay their fees."

I threw my heavy length of red-gold hair over my shoulder, and folded my arms over my chest. "Maybe we should let this one go, Chief. Lose his paperwork. We never got the memo."

Hauser shook his head, smiling. "I wish. But this one came from high up. Too many in the upper echelons know he's here, and he's wanted for more than not paying."

My gut sank. "What's he wanted for?"

"Murder."

Great. Now is the time to think of a career change, girlfriend. "Who did he allegedly kill? I thought all dragon-shifters were bat-shit crazy to begin with."

"I'm told he burned to death the port authority commander when his ship docked."

"And you want *me* to bring him in? Why me? You should be asking the Imperial army to go after him."

"They'll kill him," Hauser replied mildly. "You won't."

"If he's already committed murder, he'll be executed anyway. What's the difference?"

"Read the specs," he said, pushing the tablet toward me.

I scanned through the electronic documents, and saw only that he was needed alive for questioning. About what, the warrant didn't say. The powers that be weren't always informative, nor completely honest. If the

truth was told, they weren't always judicial in their dealings with the common folks. "Not very helpful, Chief."

"I know. But someone very important wants Killian Mandragoras alive and in custody. We have our orders, Caterina."

Reading the warrant again, I memorized all the pertinent information on this dragon, and gave him back the tablet. "I ask again: why me?"

"Your talent for shifting is legendary. You have brains, you have cunning. Look how many telepaths you've brought in. No one except you can catch them."

"If I survive this, I want twenty-five marks."

"You got it. Whatever resources you need, you'll have."

I stood up. "I'll make out my will before I go. And I'm taking Jannus's kids to the Temple tomorrow. I made him a promise."

Hauser hiked his bushy brow. "Kind of you. Send me reports on Mandragoras when you can."

Nodding, I walked out of his office and the building, thinking I should have become an entertainer as my mother wanted. Or even a doctor. Doctors and entertainers were safe jobs. Entertainers weren't sent in to bring murderous fire breathing dragons into custody.