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## Chapter 1

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### Kitty

**M**y journey to becoming a pet began when I was born in a kitten farm on the planet Felyna. All my life I'd been raised to know Felynes—as our subspecies of humanoid was called—only had one purpose; to be exported to one of the bipedal planets and sold to an owner.

My journey to being owned by one of the most powerful men in the galaxy began about eighteen years after I was born. I think it was a Tuesday. At breakfast time, I knew something was up because the handlers had put cinnamon in our morning milk, and they only ever did that to calm us. But the vet had checked us all over a week ago, so he wasn't due again for at least three months. What other reason would they need to give us the mild sedative?

Still, cinnamon worked because none of us could resist it. As I rested on my forearms and knees, my face buried in my bowl of milk, Mama-kitten came to talk to me and my sisters. She lumbered over to us, her atrophied limbs struggling to support

the weight of her heavily pregnant body. It was very rare for Mama-kitten to get up from her nesting spot.

“You’re old enough, now, little ones, to know what will happen today.” Her voice was a rasp. She was quite old, compared to the other mama-kittens that pranced around ripe with their second or third litters. Our mama-kitten wasn’t sleek and beautiful. The three of us had been her twelfth litter. But I loved Mama-kitten with all my heart. She always took care of us.

Both my sisters looked up and mewled. I continued lapping my tongue at the milk, even though I was listening.

“The twitching in my tail tells me today is your last day here. The handlers will take you soon.”

“Where will we go, Mama?” my tortoiseshell sister asked.

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know exactly what it’s like, but I’ve listened to enough conversations between the handlers over the years to pick up a few things. You will each find a new owner, someone who will cherish you and treat you as their pet. Kitties are rare, wherever you’re going. Everyone will want you. But only if you are good.”

“What happens if we’re not good enough?” my charcoal-colored sister asked. She flicked her ears as she worried.

“You will not be brought back here. Persistently naughty kitties go to a place of more pain and punishment than you could imagine. If they still don’t behave, they get put to sleep. Forever.”

We collectively stopped drinking milk to stare at her in shock.

“How do we avoid that, Mama?” My charcoal-colored sister looked ready to faint. She had always been the most delicate of our litter.

“No kitty of mine should ever go to the bad place. I raised you better than that. Don’t bite or scratch. Don’t resist. Don’t ask questions.” The same as here, then. We all knew better than to fight the handlers, no matter what they wanted to do.

She lumbered back to her sleeping spot, having showered us with the wisdom of her long life. None of us wondered how she

knew what was beyond this place. We never asked how she knew so many things. Our mama-kitten had lived long, and was so wise, it seemed perfectly reasonable to us that she might know everything.

I tried to settle, but I felt restless. I was waiting for the handlers to take us. My sisters seemed unconcerned, and they licked each other's fur and curled up beneath the high-up heating vent as though it were any normal day. Had they even listened to Mama-kitten?

We had finished our lunch—more of the thick cinnamon milk—when the handlers appeared. They waded into the pens, grabbing kittens and shoving them in big crates. At first, they seemed to have forgotten us, and I secretly hoped we could stay here, so nothing would change and we would never have to leave Mama-kitty.

I yowled as someone gripped me by the scruff of my neck, lifting me off my forearms and knees. I was unceremoniously dropped into a crate, but being a kitten, I landed safely.

Looking around the crate, I was relieved to see my sisters were in the same container as me. One had charcoal-colored hair and ears with a white tail and the other was tortoiseshell all over. There were some other kittens, too, but I barely recognized them, except in passing. There were thousands of kittens in the pens; it was impossible to know every single one.

My charcoal sister stared around the big crate with wide eyes as more kittens were dropped inside. I crawled over to her and rubbed my cheek against hers.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"I know." I wished there was something I could say to reassure her, but I had no idea what was about to happen.

The lid banged closed over us and we were left in near-darkness. The only light came through gaps between the wood. My eyes took a couple of seconds to adjust.

"I can't breathe," she quavered, her voice growing louder.

She had always been fearful, even when the rest of us were inquisitive and playful. New things terrified her. The other kittens in the pens had often teased her, and I'd gotten into more than one catfight defending her.

"We're going to die in here," she gasped, her eyes impossibly getting even wider. "We're going to suffocate."

"What's wrong with her?" A pure white cat prowled over, looking at my sister like she was cat shit. I glared at the newcomer, furious that she was bothering us.

"Leave her alone." I stuck my chin out in the hope of being more intimidating.

"There's no air! There's no air!" My sister's voice got louder and more shrill.

"Shut her up!" The white cat bared her teeth.

I arched my back and hissed at the bully. My claws elongated from my fingertips and I was ready to fight her. Instead of following through, the white cat shrank back, melding into the sea of other kittens stuffed into this big crate. Coward. Couldn't even back up her words.

Once she was gone, I rubbed my face against my sister's cheek again and spoke to her in low tones.

"You're safe, Sister," I told her. "I will keep you safe."

The crate lurched from side to side, making us all tumble a little as we got our balance. My sister squeaked but she didn't make any other sounds. I hoped she had calmed herself and come to terms with what was happening. We were moving to our new life. Whether Mama-kitten was right about what awaited us, I didn't know, but I wanted my sisters to have that perfect life we'd been told about. They deserved that.

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Kitty

We had traveled for a long time. All of us were weary and thirsty. My stomach said we'd missed at least two meals when the front of the crate was thrown open. I squinted and blinked in the daylight, before enormous men wearing white coats reached in with long metal poles and corralled us out of the crate.

Amongst the other kittens, I now stood on all fours on the shiny floor of a big, white-walled room. There were metal tables high above us. The bipedal men picked up a couple of kittens and examined them.

"Runts." They snapped their necks on the spot. A collective silence fell across the rest of us. I shuddered and huddled closer to my anxious sister, ready to protect her but afraid that I wasn't strong enough. These men were going to inspect her, and if she was found lacking, they would kill her. I would fight them with every breath in my body before I allowed them to hurt her, but I knew that would probably just result in me being harmed, too.

"Whatever happens, stay quiet and obedient," I urged my charcoal sister. She nodded, and I felt her whiskers quivering against my face. I touched her tail with mine, to comfort her. When we were very young, we used to play together, tangling our tails up so we could be attached forever, like twins sometimes were.

The men reached down and picked up a couple more kittens. After looking them over, they put them on a conveyor belt. In total, a half-dozen kittens weren't good enough. They were killed immediately.

The numbers dwindled and I had my claws ready to scratch anyone who found my sister lacking. I and my sisters were the last to be put on the conveyor belt. When we were, I started breathing again. She was safe. For now.

"It's moving. Where's it taking us? It's pulling us to our doom!" My charcoal sister was whispering urgently to herself,

scratching and biting at the conveyor belt, and flicking her tail in distress. I interrupted her by nosing the side of her body.

“Stop. You have to stop. Good kitties get to go to the good place, remember?” I wasn’t sure I believed it, but she needed to calm herself. I whispered soothing things into her ear and she settled down, but the damage had already been done. The conveyor belt was ripped and had chunks bitten out of it where she’d attacked it.

I pulled her beside me and nuzzled her neck to quiet her. My tortoiseshell sister was trying to help by singing a lullaby.

The conveyor took us through a doorway protected by hanging strips of plastic. On the other side, we saw kittens being sorted into baskets and taken away into myriad rooms.

“They’re going to find them good homes,” I told my charcoal sister, and my tortoiseshell sister nodded in agreement. She might even have believed it, for she was completely calm.

When we reached the end of the conveyor, it was switched off and a huge man in a white coat glared down at us.

“Which of you did this?” He pointed at the damage to the conveyor belt. His voice had a menacing tone that made my sisters whimper. My charcoal sister opened her mouth and I knew I had to protect her at all costs. Men who could break a kitten’s neck so easily were not going to be kind to a kitten who had damaged their property. I was stronger than her.

“I did.” My voice rang out clearly, and my sisters stared at me.

“Don’t do this,” my charcoal sister begged.

“Keep her safe,” I urged my tortoiseshell sister, as the man roughly grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. I watched my sisters being put into a basket by another man, and I had to hope they would have the happy life we’d all been promised, as we were separated.

I was turned to face the man who had picked me up.

“You just volunteered for Corellia,” he snarled. I had no idea

what that meant, but I was dumped in a basket with two other kittens, both of whom had scratches on their bodies. They must have been fighting in the crate.

“What’s Corellia?” I asked. They widened their eyes and shook their heads. One of them began to cry quietly.

The basket was loaded into a tiny crate, where we could barely move. The front was a latticework of metal, with holes in it, so it was easy to see where we were going.

We were put onto a spaceship and I went to sleep.