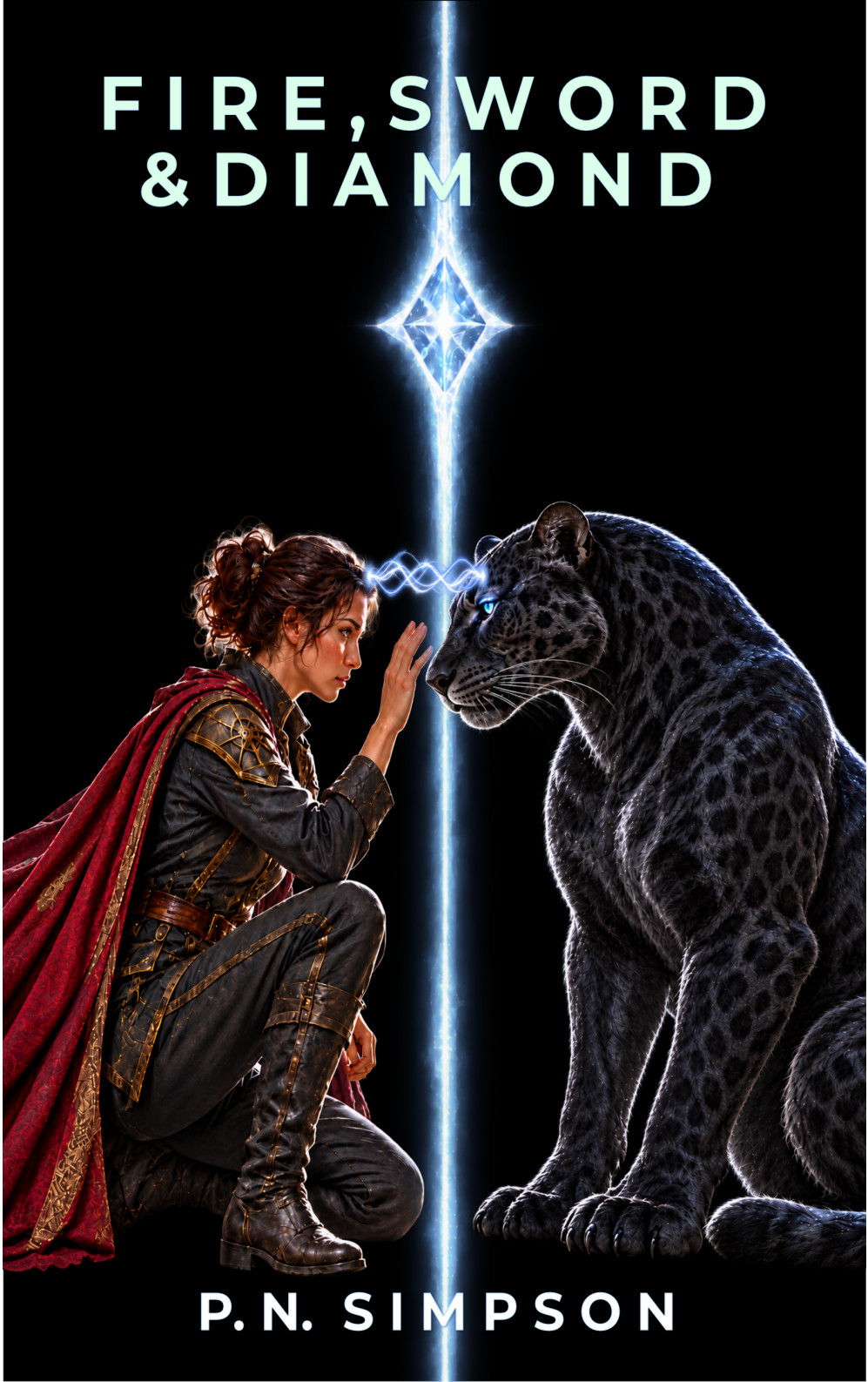
FIRE, SWORD & DIAMOND



P. N. SIMPSON

FIRE SWORD & DIAMOND

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Star Explorer Books

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To Graeme

Husband and father who encouraged

and inspired us in our writing.

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PART I MEVSURY

Prologue: Bloody Mevsury

Fire, sword, and diamond,
Together Bloody Mevsury
Run merc run!
Doggerel verse popular in the indie systems

A chilling high-pitched shriek split the silence, followed by a rasping growl. An armour-clad body slammed onto the concrete near where Rigo crouched in the rubble. A man's shriek slid into a stomach-churning gurgle cut by the sound of crunching bone.

Rigo closed his eyes and fought to control his breathing. They might miss him if he didn't move; his scent was covered by the stench of smoke, and the twin death odours of blood and bowels.

He looked for a place to hide as soon as the roar of incoming Azadi fire abated. The cavity under the smoking ruin of a warehouse was the best he could find, before the ominous sound of incoming attack shuttles drove him to ground.

The sound of a deep trill above him echoed one with a higher pitch at a distance, then he heard the tread of boots moving away. He kept his eyes closed and stayed still though his gut unclenched, and as time crept along, he began to hope his plan would work.

Until a woman's voice broke the silence.

"You may as well come out, merc. The clearance teams have finished, and the Captain wants to talk to any survivors. You'll likely still die, but a clean head shot instead of evisceration by knife or claws."

He opened his eyes and took a ragged breath, then crawled out on knees and elbows from under the tilted slab keeping his empty hands extended.

As he stood the woman snapped, “Hands above your head and turn around.” Then she clamped his hands behind his back and searched him for weapons.

“Not even carrying a knife,” she said. “You met up with us before?”

“Yes, ma’am. When I was a kid.”

Rigo couldn’t control a shudder as he glanced down at the mangled remains at his feet. From the hands it had been a dark-skinned man, and the half-armour hadn’t protected him.

The woman was smiling when he looked back. “I’m Sasha. What name do you go by?”

“Rigo,” he said, staring down at her.

A slightly-built woman in her twenties, clad in full microplate armour that hugged her curves. Her helmet visor was retracted, exposing pale skin that contrasted with vivid green eyes and red hair framing a fine-featured face.

She looked so fragile. A vivid contrast to the hulking Azadi Human females that haunted his nightmares, but he doubted size mattered. The venom of the tiny, bright-coloured t’uyn on his birth planet could kill a man in a minute of excruciating agony.

Her smile broadened, and she prodded him ahead of her through the remains of the business side of the mercenary base, to the adjacent small settlement. Precision strikes had left most structures there intact. The Azadi always did a thorough recce and focused their revenge op on the mercenary ships and soldiers. A warehouse that housed slaves wouldn’t be targeted; or any others they rated as civilian.

Rigo saw a gaggle of women and children huddled opposite a row of adults and teenagers with their hands clamped behind them. Everyone was staring at the two figures at the centre of the gathering.

One was a tall, olive-skinned woman, her generous proportions clad in full armour. At her side stood her Grahwah partner, a heavily-muscled feline predator with golden fur marked by black patterns and clad in black half-armour. It turned to watch as Rigo was pushed into the line and bared its nightmare teeth in a hiss. He shuddered, remembering the shriek and gurgle, and sound of crunching bone.

A hiss and a snort of laughter behind him showed both the Human and Grahwah soldiers guarding the prisoners saw his fear. He must have been the last stray brought in, because the woman in charge began to speak in Standard.

“I am Nareh and beside me is Goharis, we are the Captain of the Azadi Fleet warship *Mevsury*. Ships of the mercenary syndicate that infested this settlement made the mistake of operating in Azadastigh Empire space.

We responded to ensure no recurrence, and the active combatants and syndicate resources at this base have been eliminated. Merchandise slaves have been transferred to *Mevsury,* and will be taken to an Imperial welfare centre for rehabilitation.

All that remains are those who appear to be noncombatants. Women with children they claim as theirs; which we will accept to be as they appear. That leaves adults on their own and older teenagers. We are willing to leave some of these alive. Those we can determine are not soul-less bastards sheltering behind people they will exploit once we leave.”

She started with the teenagers, asking names and what they were doing on planet. All but two claimed ties to the women and other children, and the Captain didn’t press them further. The last two were questioned together, and Rigo realised why when he saw how she manipulated their responses.

“Either of you gone on runs?” she asked as the big cat at her side stared into their ashen faces. The creature had black-flecked amber eyes, that seemed to glow as it studied the two boys.

One broke down and said in a tight voice, “Missus, I go on a coupla runs. Local, I swear. Da got in trouble back home and sign on to Billy Gee’s raider so he dinna get gutted. They let him bring me with him when they move here. He got kilt two years past, and I gotta eat.”

“Kori was boardin with me, and his Da was payin til he got kilt,” a hard-faced woman called out. “I kep him but he’s growin and gotta earn his way. You let him stay; there’s jobs aplenty on the ground now you kilt so many.”

The Human Captain laughed, and her Grahwah partner gave a rumble Rigo decided was a big cat version, as a guard led the boy to join the woman.

The other boy kept his gaze steady as he told the human Captain, “I didn’t go on runs though me Da was on the ships. He was saving his money so we could move on; and didn’t want me to get into it.”

A bald-faced lie. Rigo had been on a run last year with the arrogant little sod. His Da was First Lieutenant on the merc ship, and if that bastard was saving his loot and planned to move on, it would be to buy into another ship and move up to Captain.

The Azadi Captain studied him for a moment, and then the Human half said, “Goharis doesn’t believe you, and I take her advice on spotting liars.”

A hulking Human trooper came up behind the boy and snapped his neck, dropping the body as one of his mates prodded the first of the adults forward.

A heavy-built woman with a scarred face who admitted to doing runs. “But I got shot up bad last interval, and been on the ground healin up.”

Rigo did the sums, and realised her last run could well have been into Azadi space. The Human and the Grahwah exchanged glances, and to his surprise the Human Captain said, “Dangerous business raiding, but we don’t think you’ll be a problem for the others.”

Two men and another woman didn’t make the cut, and then it was Rigo’s turn. He stepped forward, resigned to a broken neck since he’d been

raiding twelve years now. Probably a shade less painful than getting your head blasted open.

"Ter, this one's name is Rigo, and he saw an Azadi retribution action when he was a kid," Sasha volunteered before the Captain could ask a question.

"That made an impression; and I'm damned sure he didn't go on runs into Imperial space. He's been expecting us to call, and there's no civi transport out so he was stuck.

He went to ground when we came, and made sure he had no weapons. Hid so well a clearance team took out a man just by his hidey hole, and didn't know he was there."

"How old were you the last time you met up with Azadi?" the Captain asked.

"Round twelve," Rigo said. "Don't know for sure. Ma was a whore so no birth regi. Did her best ta keep me, but wore out and died afore I got old enough to make runs and keep her."

"No other way to earn a living," the Human Captain snapped.

Rigo couldn't help but stiffen, and expected to hear the trooper behind him move when the Grahwah snarled.

The woman sighed.

"Goharis just told me to watch my words. I'm not angry you went into raiding, just about this benighted universe where that's the only life open to so many. Get over with the others and see what you can do to keep everyone alive. This place doesn't look too barren, and you might get lucky and not get any merc ships coming by looking for a bolt-hole for a few years."

Rigo was still in a daze when the last Azadi shuttle lifted off.

The woman who'd spoken up for the boy yelled out, "*Bloody Mevsury* left lotsa bodies lyin 'round. We got ten hours afore the sun sets, an the bats and snarlers come lookin fer a feed.

Dump em in the hole where the ordnance warehouse usta be, and cover em with rubble. Then we kin all bunk in the high house for the time bein, now fuckin Cap Kushna got his head bit off. Lux and decent grub while it lasts!”

Chapter 1

Nareh activated the last fastenings of her formal uniform. Light armour, meant to make a statement more than provide protection. Matte black, with the red-on-gold emblem of the Azadastigh Empire over her heart. She studied her image on the display, and smiled at Goharis' trill of laughter.

'Yes, it suits me and I'm vain enough to enjoy it,' she told the Grahwah through their mind-link.

The Fleet uniform that moulded to her tall, strong build pleased her more than the colourful draped robes Humans usually wore for formal occasions at the Imperial Court. The black set off her amber eyes and the zgayun tattoo on her olive skin, so she looked even more like Goharis.

'You look better without any coverings,' Goharis responded*.' Even after centuries of zgayun bonding, Grahwah still don't understand the Human obsession with clothing.*

During cold weather, of course you need coverings for warmth since you lack insulating fur except for your head and genital patches. And even Grahwah wear armour serving in the Fleet, with the risks of modern weapons.

But I like what you did with your hair.'

Nareh looked back at the display and turned her head to see the design. Sections of her straight, chestnut hair had been coloured russet-red, mimicking the striped pattern on Goharis' legs and tail that contrasted with her golden coat.

'Humans look plain compared with Grahwah,' she told Goharis. '*That's why we use clothing and decorate exposed skin to enhance our appearance. But we need to get going. Neither the Emperor nor the Kayser will be pleased if we're late for the audience.'*

* * *

Human Emperor Khoramit smiled with appreciation, echoed by his Grahwah counterpart Kaysar Zarmanalis' deep rumble, as they watched Nareh and Goharis cross the courtyard on the holo-screen. The tall Human in her form-fitting black armour matched the loping pace of the golden Grahwah cat by her side. Equally graceful, beautiful, and deadly.

'My great-niece and your great-granddaughter, Grahwah and Human, yet they are closer than most sisters. Closer than you and me, and we've been companions for over a hundred years,' Zarmanalis said through their mind-link.

Khoramit chuckled. '*They were cubs together, born within days of each other and equally bold and adventurous.'*

'Bold and adventurous? Rather reckless and impetuous,' Zarmanalis retorted. '*Traits they continue to share, despite what happened when they ignored the warning signs and fell into the hidden workroom of the Ararich ancients.*

They survived the sudden transition to full zgayun bonding, but you'd think the agony would linger. Engender vivid memories to temper their---'