

# Chapter 1

## *Liberty*

‘I need a photo of this view for my socials,’ my mother says as we gaze upon the alien landscape of the Kauri home world through the porthole of King Helion’s prized intergalactic spacecraft, an IG-MA Falcon.

‘You don’t have any socials,’ I remind her.

‘Then I need to sign up,’ she murmurs.

From a distance, planet Ephora sparkles like a crown jewel in this corner of the galaxy. Up close it is much like Earth, defined by vast blue oceans and jigsaw-like land masses, though the vegetation is a soft mauve colour rather than the green of home. Ephora is a comparable size to Earth and to say it looks like Paradise is to do it a massive disservice.

No one on the flight deck speaks for several minutes as we breach Ephora’s atmosphere. I assume everyone is captivated by the view, apprehensive about our mission, or both. My mother and Gemini flank me. King Helion broods alone by the porthole adjacent to ours. Behind us across the flight deck our two satyrs, Lanos and Gloria, stand shoulder to shoulder intent on their slice of the view, with Secretary-General of the United Nations on Earth, Kassi Milwhari having commandeered a porthole to their right. I can only wonder what my father and Adam Warhurst are thinking as they guide our spacecraft in. Has there ever been a more stunning view from the cockpit?

Beside me Gemini clutches his tablet to his chest as he studies the vista below.

‘What kind of reception do you think we’ll get here?’ I ask.

Gemini smirks. ‘To be honest, I’m pleasantly surprised they haven’t shot us down already.’

‘I trust the Kauri will honour the truce, Liberty,’ Helion says. ‘They’re not barbarians, after all.’

Gemini scoffs but it’s my mother who speaks.

‘They’ll honour the truce as far as hearing us out,’ she says, ‘but that doesn’t mean we’ll survive this trip.’

‘You’ve probably got the best chance of survival, Rose,’ Gemini says.

‘Because I look like a Kauri?’ my mother says.

Gemini nods. ‘Precisely that.’

My mother’s consciousness has been trapped inside a Kauri cyborg shell for a month now, and I still find it disconcerting. The humanoid body is fine, but the blue skin, complete lack of body hair, and the crescent-shaped metal strip on the right side of her scalp mark her as supremely alien. Though *my* cyborg body is hairless, without the metal strip and blue skin, I can easily pass as human.

Helion strides to the command console. ‘People, gather round,’ he says.

Once we’re all seated, I review our envoy again. King Helion, head of the Alliance but also representing Rhybor’s wehrdragons; Milwhari and Gemini on behalf of Earth; Lanos and Gloria flying the flag for the satyrs of Abundoo; and then my mother and me – the cyborg sideshow.

‘We need to stay positive,’ Helion says. ‘We don’t want war.’

‘Agreed,’ Kassi Milwhari says, nodding his head and setting his dark braids dancing around his broad shoulders. ‘Diplomacy is always preferable. Let’s hope we don’t actually need this alliance you’ve created, King Helion.’

‘Aye to that, Earthling,’ Lanos says. ‘I hope you’ve got some fancy words to win over these robots.’

Milwhari holds the satyr’s eye. ‘We’ll find out soon enough, sir.’

‘One must speak truly but with subtlety to be Secretary-General of the United Nations on Earth, Lanos,’ Helion says, ‘so have faith.’

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The intercom beeps once before the message from the cockpit.

*Final approach, Adam Warhurst says. Docking in five minutes.*

Major Adam Warhurst – Felix’s psychotic half-brother – believes he’s Maverick from Top Gun so that’s why he’s on this mission. In reality, he’s little more than a glorified chauffeur. Helion only brought Adam on this mission to deny him any opportunity to kill Felix. Felix should be on the lunar base by now, ready for an offensive if war is declared. I scan the sky for Tytus, Ephora’s second largest moon, but it’s yet to rise this evening. I’d rather be there with my boyfriend than here. And if we survive this mission, that’s where I *will* be.

As our destination comes into view, I study the sprawling Kamisinnian Canyon, which looks like a grander version of the Grand Canyon on Earth. A ten thousand square kilometre plateau has been at the mercy of water, ice, and glacial activity for millions of years. Deep, wide channels – some still glistening with flowing water – wind their way through the majestic countryside. Stone megaliths sprout from the canyon floor, having somehow defied the relentless waterflow over eons. The Kauri have carved their homes from the rocky towers as well as the sheer cliffs framing the canyon, and the thousands of bubbled windows reflect the sunlight like a sequined coat.

One elongated stony elevation pulses with soft amber light, and as I contemplate our precarious landing on this platform, Helion distracts me.

‘People,’ he says, running his hand over his frohawk, ‘I hope you’re all ready for this.’ He turns to my mother and me. ‘Can you please bring the squidgers?’

My artificial heart flutters. The squidgers are our bargaining chips. If anything were to go wrong with them, we are dead in the water here ... no pressure!

My mother loops her arm around mine as we make our way to the armoury. ‘Isn’t this exciting?’ she whispers.

‘You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you,’ I say.

Her blue lips curl into a smile. ‘I really am. You’re not?’

I return her smile. ‘Not as much as you are, I’m thinking.’

My mother is a quantum physicist who was part of the team that successfully opened a portal between Earth and Rhybor. But after being entangled in a prototype and then spaghettified by it, I suppose almost anything in life would now seem exciting.

Once we've retrieved the squidgers from the lockers, we rejoin the team and everyone eyes the weapons warily. I don't blame them. This Kauri tech resembles a short-barrelled machine gun with a flared bell, and it will extract all the space from a lifeform then store its atomic elements in the attached cartridge.

Adam's voice comes through the speakers. *Landing in thirty seconds.*

I strap myself into a seat and close my eyes. I want to savour the touchdown for this momentous event. Once our spacecraft settles on the platform, the engines power down and we endure several seconds of silence before the order comes from outside our ship, 'Exit your vehicle.'

We file out of our spacecraft. Helion leads the way with Adam, followed by Lanos and Gloria, then Milwhari, Gemini, and my father. My mother and I bring up the rear. I pinch my pendant between my fingers, rubbing my Liberty half-dollar coin for luck. Gravel crunches under my boots as I step onto alien land. I suck in my first breath of the Ephoran atmosphere and, despite the enormity of what we're aiming to achieve here, excitement sizzles through me.

With the sun setting behind them, three Kauri stand ready to greet us – one the colour of lavender, another of charcoal and the last one, lustrous silver. They're armed – squidgers in hand and blasters on their belts.

'Put the squidgers on the ground,' the silver cyborg calls.

My mother and I obey then approach the Kauri trio with the rest of our group. We're over a kilometre above the canyon floor here. I hope no one is scared of heights.

'I am King Helion of Rhybor,' Helion says. 'My friends and I are honoured that you have allowed us an audience with you.'

The lavender Kauri, female in appearance, lowers her squidger. 'I am Minerva.' She gestures to the charcoal-coloured Kauri to her left. 'This is Atticus, and'—she indicates the silver cyborg who is collecting the squidgers we relinquished—'that is Schroeder.'

Atticus steps forward and addresses Helion. ‘Who are your companions?’

Gemini’s face remains serene as Helion makes the introductions. Our genius doesn’t even flinch when he is introduced as Secretary-General Milwhari’s personal assistant. Helion’s mission here is primarily a negotiation but is also a reconnaissance. If we can’t convince the Kauri to abandon their plan to optimise our galaxy, hopefully Gemini can sniff out some intel that could help us fight them later – if we escape this place.

The silver Schroeder returns with our squidgers and points to my mother. ‘You,’ he says, ‘are a prototype of the Eskor tribe and, as such, are Kauri property. Atticus will escort you to your accommodation now.’

‘I have a human consciousness,’ my mother says calmly, ‘which is not Kauri property.’

‘Well, if your consciousness would kindly vacate the premises it is occupying,’ Atticus says, ‘we’ll happily just take our hardware.’

I clench my hands into fists. We all knew this was a possibility, but I really hoped it wouldn’t play out.

‘Could you transfer her consciousness to a generic shell?’ I ask. ‘One that we could take with us when we leave?’

‘We’d be happy to compensate you for it,’ Helion adds.

‘Given the weight of the matter you’ve come to negotiate,’ Schroeder says, ‘I’m surprised you’d haggle over one consciousness.’

‘Yet you press your claim over this one shell,’ Adam says.

Helion glares at Adam while my mother sticks to our script. ‘I will accept your hospitality ... for now,’ she says.

As long as they don’t tamper with her consciousness, my mother might be able to do some surreptitious digging in the Kauri systems.

Helion bows his head to her, and I catch and squeeze her hand – the briefest gesture of support – before Atticus leads her away. My mother matches the dark Kauri stride for stride, her back straight and head held high. Foreboding strikes me like a lightning bolt. Will I see my mother again? I thought I’d lost her when I discovered her spaghettified remains on Rhybor; I can’t go through that again. A flood of resolve washes through my system, dampening my fears but not dispelling them.

*Atticus.* I'll remember that name. Atticus. If any harm comes to my mother, I'll need that name. Atticus. Atticus. The name bounces around inside my skull, morphing into Ratticus, which seems appropriate. Kauri are undeniably creepy and cunning, and this one's dark façade reminds me of a rodent.

A step ahead of Atticus, my mother sets foot on a polished disc set into the ground then disappears.

My hand goes to my pendant as Gloria gasps.

'What just happened?' I say. 'Where did she go?'

'She is being transported,' Minerva says, as Atticus steps onto the disc and disappears. 'It is a more sophisticated version of what you would call an "elevator".'

Minerva eyes Helion. 'We will talk now.'

'I'd like those'—Helion points to the squidgers we've brought—'at our meeting.'

Minerva nods. 'As you wish. Follow me.'

We fall in behind Minerva, leaving Schroeder to bring up the rear. I watch Minerva, Helion, Adam, Milwhari, and Gemini disappear before I step onto the gleaming disc. Silence and beige envelop me. For several seconds I feel weightless. Then, between heartbeats, I'm standing in a tunnel with my companions.

Once Schroeder arrives and Helion checks that everyone except my mother is accounted for, Minerva says, 'This way.'

We fall in line behind her. The tunnel we traverse is like a vein in the mountain; the mineral deposits in the polished walls sparkle in the soft glow from the lights embedded overhead. The only sound as we wind our way downward is the clicking of the satyrs' hooves on stone. I imagine the others are as hypervigilant as I am, ready for anything the Kauri might throw at us. Just because so few were on hand to greet us doesn't mean there aren't many more waiting to make their move.

Minerva stops and spins round. 'Here,' she says, gesturing to an archway in the rock.

The pearlescent floor of the expansive, domed chamber we enter contrasts with the darker striations in the stone of the walls and ceiling, but to my surprise, the room is devoid of any furniture. The Kauri are

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supposed to be the most advanced lifeform in the galaxy, so where is all their tech?

Without warning, an oval table morphs from the floor, with eleven matching stools encircling it. Before I can ask how furniture sprouts from the floor without a visible cue, Minerva speaks.

‘Please, be seated,’ she says, as Schroeder places our confiscated squidgers on the table.

‘Is anyone else coming?’ Helion asks once we are settled.

‘Only Atticus,’ Schroeder says.

Lanos clears his throat. ‘This is a weighty matter we have come to discuss. I thought more of your kind would be involved.’

‘We are enough,’ Schroeder says.

‘How many Kauri are there?’ my father asks.

‘We are just shy of ten billion here in this galaxy, Caspian,’ Minerva says. ‘A sustainable and appropriate number. This galaxy is our garden. Somewhere to live and play.’

‘Play?’ Helion cocks his head. ‘I’m not sure we have the same definition of “play”.’

‘That word offends you?’ Minerva says. ‘Would you prefer “tend”?’ We are tending our garden, shaping it, and nurturing it, as we strive for perfection and balance.’

‘A worthy ambition when you’re dealing with plants,’ Helion says, ‘but not sentient beings.’

Minerva feigns shock. ‘Do you never impact sentient beings, King Helion? Have you never eaten meat?’

‘One must eat to survive.’

‘Ah, but one need not eat meat. Ever had a pet? Ridden a horse? Killed a pesky cockroach?’

Helion frowns, but Minerva continues, ‘It is the way of life that superior beings exert their will over inferior beings. It has always been so.’

‘Just because it has always been so, doesn’t make it right.’

Minerva’s eyes narrow. ‘Says the man who clings to a crumbling monarchy.’

Nettled, Helion leans forward in his seat as Atticus appears in the doorway. ‘I’ve never had a pig, horse, cat, or cockroach come to negotiate with me,’ Helion says. ‘Had they done so, I’d certainly have given them a hearing.’

‘So only if a creature can petition in a language acceptable to you, would you afford them any status?’ Schroeder says.

‘It certainly makes negotiations easier,’ Helion declares, ‘which is why you should rethink your optimisation mission. Currently, a hundred worlds oppose you and that number will rise. Perhaps our knowledge falls short of Kauri intelligence, but we are strong in will, and we will fight if you won’t call off your crusade.’

Atticus seats himself on the vacant stool. ‘You’re suggesting that “might over mind” could be a winning strategy for you?’

‘We have a lot of firepower,’ Lanos says. ‘And some of it is yours.’

Atticus purses his dark lips. ‘I’ll guarantee *none* of it is ours.’

‘How is that?’ Milwhari asks.

‘We Kauri do not make weapons,’ Schroeder says.

Into the shocked silence that follows, Minerva adds, ‘We steal weapons, we have even used some of those weapons – but we do not design or manufacture weapons.’

I can’t hold my tongue. ‘Are you claiming that your squidger is not a weapon?’

Minerva nods. ‘It does not kill,’ she says. ‘Lifeforms can be easily reinstated in their original form. Completely unharmed.’

Lanos growls. ‘We’re getting off track here,’ the satyr says. ‘We didn’t come to quibble about the definition of a weapon.’

Gloria pipes up. ‘Correct,’ she says. ‘We are here for a permanent truce. We want you Kauri to cease all activities associated with your optimisation mission in our galaxy.’

The three Kauri respond in unison. ‘No.’

‘You might as well,’ Helion presses. ‘Your Prime Formula won’t work now anyway.’

Minerva frowns. ‘What could you possibly know about the Prime Formula?’



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Gemini has done a great job so far of staying out of the conversation and to help him continue, I jump in.

‘You thought you had it all figured out,’ I say, ‘who you’d put where in your “garden”. But now we’re rebelling, surely that compromises your formula.’

Minerva smiles. ‘On the contrary. We simply have more data now to refine our calculations. This will actually improve our results!’

As I weigh up how much more ‘smug’ I can take, Adam swipes both squidgers from the table and Minerva and Schroeder disappear!

‘Warhurst!’ Helion roars. ‘Stand—’

But Atticus vanishes too before Helion’s order is complete.

Gloria leaps onto Adam who grunts, grasps one of her looping horns then tosses her aside. I dive at him, wrestling one squidger from him. Gemini rips the other from Adam’s grasp then aims the device at him.

‘We can’t take this crap!’ Adam screams, reaching for my squidger. ‘We need to teach them a lesson!’

Lanos and Gloria tackle him and pin him face down on the floor.

Gemini’s finger is on the trigger. ‘Do you want me to restrain him, Your Highness?’

‘I want those three Kauri restored,’ Helion says, ‘before the cavalry arrives.’

‘Cavalry?’ my father says.

‘You think other Kauri are watching?’ Milwhari says.

Helion nods. ‘Absolutely.’ His brow creases as he studies the two squidgers. ‘One of those squidgers has two of our hosts, while the other squidger has one. Which is which though?’

‘Does it matter?’ I ask. ‘If we each do two restores, we get our three hosts and they’ll get a bonus blue one we captured on Rhybor. That was the point of bringing these, wasn’t it? To return hostages as a show of goodwill?’

‘Yes,’ Helion says. ‘Let’s just hope that whichever blue Kauri appears is not armed.’

I hadn’t thought of that. Thousands of blue Kauri were captured the night we drove them from Rhybor, and most of them were armed.

‘If they’re bearing weapons, we’ll recapture them,’ Gemini says. He turns to me. ‘Do you know where the restore switch is?’

When I shake my head, he points it out.

‘Quickly,’ Helion says, ‘before there is any retaliation.’

I flick the restore switch and squeeze the trigger. Atticus returns.

Beside him, Minerva reappears – thanks to Gemini.

‘Go again,’ Gemini says as the two restored Kauri launch themselves at us.

I aim at Atticus, hoping to create an obstacle between us with the Kauri I restore.

I squeeze and Schroeder is back.

Near Minerva, there’s a flash of blue and the faint flicker of a humanoid form and then ... nothing.

‘What the ...?’ I say as our three restored Kauri hosts close in.

In an effort to appease the nettled Kauri by returning some of their brethren we captured on Rhybor, I squeeze the trigger twice more, with the same result. It’s as though I bring a blue Kauri back but they instantly disappear again. Atticus, Schroeder, and Minerva came back fine. Why not the others? Have they been trapped inside the squidger cartridge too long? The Kauri transferred captured lifeforms from the cartridges into ‘Seeds’ – soccer-ball-sized crystal spheres – for long-term storage. Maybe the cartridges don’t preserve stored lifeforms as well as Seeds do. If the Kauri we’ve imprisoned can’t be returned, we have no bargaining power.

Atticus has a blaster aimed at Helion as Schroeder and Minerva take the squidgers from Gemini and me.

‘Our colleague chose poorly,’ Milwhari says obsequiously, glancing at Adam who is on his feet now that Lanos and Gloria have released him. ‘I hope we can continue our—’

‘Silence!’ Atticus commands.

With his blaster, Schroeder points to Adam. ‘You cannot remain here. You will be given alternate accommodation,’ he says. The silver cyborg then gestures to my father, Lanos, and Milwhari. ‘And you three will accompany him.’

Adam sneers. ‘And if we refuse your alternate accommodation?’

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Schroeder points his squidger at Adam and the wehr disappears. The Kauri turns his gaze on Lanos. ‘Now, would you like to walk, or would you like to join your friend inside the squidger?’

‘I’ll walk,’ the satyr says.

My father and Milwhari nod their agreement.

Before he leaves, my father winks at me and mouths the words ‘See you soon’. Though not confident I *will* see him soon, I nod in return.

‘And what of the rest of us?’ Helion says, as Schroeder leads our companions away.

Minerva and Atticus keep their squidgers trained on us.

‘Sit,’ Atticus says.

‘We will continue our meeting,’ Minerva says once we’re all seated around the table again, ‘but any more dissent, and your entire crew will be terminated.’

The thought that we might die even if we are compliant precipitates a wave of nausea; and then I wrestle the sense of foreboding that comes with the next thought – of dying so far from home.