

Chapter 1

Day 1

Elvira

‘Would you like me to print a coffee for you, Elvira?’ my father asks.

I drag my gaze from the chaos beyond the glass wall of my palace suite. ‘Got anything stronger, Aeon?’

My father sighs. ‘I’m not talking with my daughter now, am I?’

‘Elvira is currently resting,’ I say. ‘By the king’s order.’

‘And you are?’ he says, pressing a series of buttons on the food printer.
‘Nat McGregor.’

Nat is my shield. She’s a character I played in the stage production *Hit and Miss*. She’s a hard-arse teenage runaway whose quick mind and smart mouth got her *into* as much trouble as *out* of it as she trekked cross-country in search of her true place in the world. For me, that production was a world away. Literally. That was back on Earth. Now I’m on Rhybor, a world in disarray.

‘The king cannot command *me*,’ I add.

My father’s raised eyebrows register his alarm. ‘Elvira … what are you—’

‘*Nat*,’ I remind him, ‘is not going to sit idly by while this city goes to hell.’

‘King Helion has matters in hand.’

I scoff, returning my gaze to the scene outside. ‘Really? Can you not sense the desperation out there? Helion’s going to have a riot on his hands if he doesn’t get these people into accommodation soon.’

My father joins me at the transparent wall of my suite, cradling his coffee. We survey the ravaged city as dawn creeps over it.

It’s been only a handful of hours since the Kauri abandoned Ilion City, Rhybor’s capital. Scars from last night’s shootout with the aliens – scorched and smoking buildings, shattered glass, smouldering and mangled vehicles – are now a backdrop to the seething throng of returned wehrdragons, who are dazed and disoriented, and grappling with the fact that they’ve been restored to a world that is twenty years older than when they last saw it. Some wehrs are in human form, but many have Shifted, so dragons are soaring around the city too.

‘King Helion will handle it,’ my father insists.

‘Many hands make light work,’ I say.

‘You look like a Kauri,’ my father says. ‘It’s not safe for you to go out there.’

He has a point. My skin *is* blue and the week’s regrowth on my scalp doesn’t do anything to hide the silver tattoos, which is a problem. It really was an excellent disguise though, and totally necessary to infiltrate enemy headquarters to rescue Felix.

I send Nat back to the casting room, then inhale deeply. My blood ignites, triggering my Shift. I let my robe slip from my shoulders as my vertebrae replicate and expand, lengthening my neck and creating my tail. A series of soft clicks is evidence that tightening tendons are realigning the bones in my limbs all the way down to my fingers and toes. My skull re-forms – flattening and elongating to accommodate my reptilian snout. Several ribs dislocate to form wings, which sprout from under my shoulder blades an instant before my skin hardens into scales.

I don’t look like a Kauri now, I send to him once my dragon is out.

My father sighs. ‘What is your plan?’ he asks. ‘You do have one, don’t you?’

Yes. I’m going to retrieve the Kauri Seed, which is currently in an unsecured location.

'You're hoping King Helion will forgive you for venturing out against his orders if you retrieve a Kauri artefact?'

A shiver rolls down my spine. *Yes.*

The Seed is not just an 'artefact'. It's one of the Kauri's most insidious devices. It looks like a crystal ball, but is in fact a diabolical, portable prison. In their twenty-year occupation of this planet, the aliens captured billions of wehrs by extracting *all* the space from every individual they seized and then depositing each victim's atomic elements in their Seed.

I ditched the crystal sphere in an apartment during the melee last night and we can't afford for it to fall into the wrong hands. The king needs it and there's no time to waste.

My father shakes his head as he turns and heads for the kitchenette. I watch him tip his coffee into the sink, then rinse his cup and place it upside down on the wire drainer.

'Can't get used to that printed stuff,' he mutters. 'Give me real coffee beans or nothing.'

Instead of returning to me, my father strides towards the door.

Where are you going? I ask.

'To be useful,' he replies. 'We're in a state of emergency – lots to do.'

Once he's gone, I shuffle out onto the expansive balcony – two hundred storeys above ground level. The cacophony of the mob assaults me as I leap onto the rail, fluttering my wings to steady myself.

The city is a shambles. Communications are only partially back online and the few aircraft that are operating are dropping food and water to the millions of wehrs clogging the roads around the palace. Ground transport is crawling. The struggle to return city wehrs – those who can't or won't fly – to their apartments outside the central zone is painful to watch. But it is not only city wehrs who were freed from the Kauri Seed last night. Wehrs from all over this vast continent are milling about, desperate for a way out of the city to see what has become of their homes and families.

Hundreds of dragons are gliding around the city, so one more won't make a difference. I dive from my perch, wings outstretched. Exhilaration courses through me. As I soar over street after crowded street, I wonder

why more wehrs haven't Shifted into dragon form. Maybe to save the clothes they're wearing.

But then another thought slams home.

Not everyone down there is a wehr. Rhybor was an intergalactic trading port for elenium before the Kauri arrived, and it hosted many aliens from across the galaxy at any given time. There were potentially thousands of visitors here when the Kauri invaded, and they would have been stored by the Kauri alongside the wehrs. And they too are now out in Ilion City's streets.

A chill that has nothing to do with the crisp morning snakes through my veins.

Our secret ... is out.

The secret that has protected us wehrs for thousands of years; the secret that has divided us for a century now – is not a secret anymore.

Everyone knew that Rhybor had dragons. No outsiders were aware that we were shapeshifters though. I scan the crowd. I spot a satyr, an elf, and what looks like an oversized otter doing their best to blend into the crowd.

Wehr Crusaders have been scheming for years to overthrow the monarchy so the truth about wehrdragons could be officially exposed. Has the king realised his position is now on shakier ground than ever?

Should I go back to the palace?

No. The apartment is only four blocks away, and King Helion needs the Seed.

I land on the charred remains of the apartment's balcony before picking my way through the carnage to where I deposited the Seed in a bedroom inside. No internal walls are visible now, nor is any of the furniture intact – or even recognisable for that matter. To say the apartment is in ruins is incredibly generous. There is no fire risk now though. The sprinklers have done their job admirably.

As I rummage through twisted metal and soggy foam, my spidey senses start tingling. Someone is watching me.

I continue my task without looking up, but I take a deep breath – ready to defend myself with fire.

I hear the scuttling sound before I see anything. Pausing my quest, I spin round and roar – spewing flame – until my lungs are empty. Only when I'm spent do I see it, and then I only *just* see it. That's kind of the point of chameleons.

It's a lot bigger than the ones I've seen on Earth but it's smaller than me, and its crystalline scales are misfiring, like faulty Christmas lights. Its bulging eyes flash dangerously.

'Why don't you look before you unleash?' the chameleon says. 'You could hurt someone!'

Okay, not only are chameleons here bigger – they talk too! And it must have one of those universal translators that I've heard about.

Sorry, I send to it. You startled me.

It scoffs. 'Typical dragon,' it mutters before slinking off through a large hole in the exterior wall.

I release a shuddering breath, thankful that this alien encounter wasn't life-threatening. It's a good reminder that I need to be on guard though. Just because the Kauri have gone, doesn't mean that the city is safe.

I recommence my rummaging and within minutes I've located my treasure. Despite the urgency, I cradle the soccer-sized crystal sphere in my scaly palms and gaze into its heart. It's like gazing into the night sky, filled with its myriad cosmic beauties. Twinkling pinpricks of light cluster in swirling galaxies. Miniaturised quasars streak across its belly in every colour of the rainbow. And while its beauty is mesmerising, I remember that the crystal harbours the atoms of billions of lifeforms the Kauri have harvested in their quest to optimise the universe.

I trail my talons over the inch-wide metal band that encircles the Seed and count the clicks each time I snag one of the small indentations on its surface. Twenty-four. Twenty-four cartridges from the Kauri squidgers – their miniaturising weapons – could be emptied into the Seed at a time. It doesn't bear thinking about the number of individuals who are stored inside.

Shouting outside interrupts my musing, and I hug the sphere against my chest. Time to go.

I waddle to the balcony to survey the scene. Dozens of dragons are in the air, fluttering above the raucous crowd, which is a fast-moving stream of looters.

I launch into the air, hoping I look like just another looter and that no one looks too closely at my treasure. Beating my wings for altitude, I stay on the fringe of the airborne contingent. As we approach the palace the dragons peel off, probably keen to avoid being caught with contraband. I soldier on though, heading for my suite. My wing muscles are spent by the time I reach my landing site, so I scamper inside. But I'm not alone.

A man and a woman are seated on my sofa. Both are wearing loose black trousers and fitted sleeveless vests.

'I'm Jillindra,' the woman says, rising to her feet. She gestures to her companion. 'And this is Hugo. We're pilots – here to collect you for a mission. Please Shift now.'

Turn around, I send to her, and I'll be happy to oblige.

Jillindra spins round and indicates to Hugo to do the same.

I place the Seed on a cushion and collect my robe before commencing my Shift. Once I've reclaimed my human form and secured my robe, I say, 'This mission ... is from Helion?'

'The mission is from *King* Helion,' Hugo says, turning to face me.

'Oh, right,' I say. '*King* Helion.'

'Who will be unhappy that you weren't in your quarters,' Hugo adds.

I feel the heat in my cheeks and wonder if my blue skin conceals the red blush.

Jillindra eyes the Seed on the cushion. 'What's that?'

'A prized Kauri artefact,' I say. 'They call it the Seed. Millions of lifeforms are trapped inside. It was in an unsecure location, so I thought I'd retrieve it while I was awaiting further instructions.'

Hugo nods sharply. 'We will deliver it to King Helion on the way.'

'On the way to where?' I ask.

'The flight hangar,' Jillindra replies. 'King Helion has charged us with retrieving the Starlifter. Hugo will pilot the chopper to deliver us to

the site. I will fly the Starlifter to a secure location. Your job is to make sure your companions do not compromise the mission.'

My heart races. The Starlifter. The Kauri commandeered Rhybor's fleet of aircraft when they invaded twenty years ago. Felix, and Liberty's cyborg mother, Rose, managed to steal one of the gargantuan cargo carriers with enough weapons to stage last night's coup to drive out the aliens. The Kauri are gone, for now, but tensions between wehr Loyalists and Crusaders are high and the threat of violence is real. I have no doubt my friends will defend the aircraft. Jillindra and Hugo are right to worry about resistance to an attempt to retrieve the Starlifter.

I retrieve the Seed from the cushion and cradle it gently. 'Let's get this mission underway then. We shouldn't keep the king waiting.'

Felix

Bathed in midmorning light, Liberty is beautiful. A halo of light crowns my girlfriend's head. Elvira called her the Ice Queen, and Liberty could certainly pass for royalty, despite the fact that she's currently squatting among the litter and debris from last night's shenanigans.

I survey the landscape around the Starlifter, the gigantic Rhyborian military aircraft Liberty's mother, Rose, and I stole from under the Kauris' noses. This ten-kilometre square airfield on the northern edge of Ilion City seems to have seen little love during the Kauri occupation. The towers and hangars are decrepit. The broken windows are crusted with grime and most of the paint has peeled off and blown away. Some hardy weeds have sprouted from cracks in the runways, and from the compacted ground between and around the concrete landing strips, but there is more dust than greenery out here now. Aside from the discarded weaponry, that is.

I collect another squidger cartridge. 'I wonder how many lifeforms are stuck inside this thing.'

Liberty shudders. 'I don't want to think about that.'

I don't want to think about it either, but it's hard not to. We handed out squidgers to the wehrs last night in the fight against the Kauri. Using their own tech against them seemed like a good idea. Capturing and

storing the aliens, rather than killing them all, makes sense when you know there's a whole lot more aliens out there that will come seeking retribution. The Rhyborians didn't know they were capturing Kauri though. They thought they were vaporising the enemy. And now there's a heap of cartridges out there with stored Kauri and wehrs ... and who knows what else.

'Gemini is lucky he got out of this clean-up duty,' I say.

'He sprained his ankle,' Liberty says, stashing another blaster in her dust bag. 'You call that lucky?'

'I reckon he did it on purpose,' I say. 'Or he's faking it. How many times has he told us he's a genius, an assassin, and a spy?'

Liberty grimaces. 'Gemini tripped over Grim before the fighting even started last night.'

'That doesn't prove he didn't plan it,' I say, secretly hoping that it was our feline companion that had masterminded Gemini's current predicament, bringing the genius down a peg or two.

Changing the subject, I say, 'It looks like there was a music festival here last night.'

Liberty shakes her head. 'I don't know what kind of music festivals you've been to, but I've never been to one where the main source of litter is blasters and squidgers.'

'Why was there even any fighting here?' I say. 'I thought the only battle was in the city.'

'The battle against the Kauri was in the city,' Liberty agrees, 'but once the aliens started to leave, heaps of wehrs came back here to celebrate. There was no fighting, just a heap of gratuitous blaster fire. It was like New Year's Eve fireworks out here. It's actually amazing no one was killed.'

'Are you sure no one was killed?'

Liberty looks around the field. 'If there were any bodies, we'd see them.' She frowns, then points towards the city. 'Incoming.'

I spin round. Dust swirls into the air, churned up by six trailbikes speeding our way.

'And not just on the ground,' Liberty adds, pointing to the inbound helicopter. 'Airborne too.'

I nod in the Starlifter's direction. 'We need to get inside to warn the others.'

But I'm talking to myself. Liberty is already sprinting towards the aircraft. She takes the front stairs two at a time, then disappears through the hatch.

I'm at her heels as she dumps her dust bag inside the door and yells, 'Arm yourselves! We have company!'

I toss my bag beside hers and snatch a blaster from the nearest crate.

'Didn't think I'd be doing this again so soon,' I say, glancing at Gemini, who draws a blaster from his shoulder holster as Liberty's parents arm themselves with weapons from the crates.

From his crew seat, our assassin-in-residence points to the rear of the aircraft. 'Head them off there if you can,' Gemini says. 'We'll secure this end.'

Liberty's mother frowns. 'I'll go with Liberty and Felix,' Rose says.

'You stay here, Rose,' Gemini says. 'You can't be seen looking like that.'

Rose hangs her head. Having her consciousness transplanted into a synthetic Kauri body saved her life but looking like a Kauri makes it too dangerous for her to be seen anywhere.

'I'll go, Rose,' Caspian says to his wife. 'You protect Gemini.'

Gemini's eyes widen. 'Seriously?'

Grim hisses.

'Take the cat with you,' Gemini growls.

I roll my eyes. 'As if cats take orders from anyone.'

'Go!' Gemini says.

'Starboard side is yours, Liberty,' I say. 'I'll take port.'

Liberty nods once and ducks around a crate to take her corridor. I assume her father will follow her so I take off to cover my side. Our footfalls echo inside the aircraft's cavernous interior. We arrive at the aircraft's rear opening as three of the bikes skid to a halt, spraying pebbles over the Starlifter's back-loading ramp. The lone chopper hovers a short distance away.

'Two riders have gone to the front of our aircraft,' Liberty says as the riders dismount, 'and one to the chopper.'

'They *could* be friendlies,' Caspian says, joining us on the ramp.

'Safer to assume they're not,' I say, raising my voice over the noise of the chopper rotors.

Caspian grunts as the three riders dismount and draw their weapons.

'Still think they're friendlies?' I ask.

'We have weapons,' Caspian says. 'Can't say I blame them for drawing theirs.'

Zrip! Zrip! Zrip!

The sound of blaster fire in the field distracts me from the advancing wehrs.

'What the ...' Liberty says.

I study the lone rider firing at the helicopter. 'Seems the chopper's not part of their crew,' I call.

'I don't know if that's better or worse for us,' Liberty says as the three riders approach.

'Worse,' the woman at the front of the pack calls out. 'Definitely worse.'

The bikies aren't wearing robes. They're in drill fatigues. If they *are* wehrs, they're not planning to Shift. It's going to be a gun fight. Once in position, each wehr holds their ground. There's no fidgeting. This is a well-drilled team.

Zrip! Zrip!

Two more shots is all it takes for the helicopter to erupt into flames, and the trio before us cheers.

'Look at that!' one male cries.

'Helion's gonna be pissed!' the other male says.

'Business at hand, boys,' the woman leader says. 'We have a job to do.'

'You shot down the king's helicopter?' Caspian says.

The woman winks. 'Yep.'

'Crusaders,' I mutter.

'Correct!' she says. 'Who would have thought the half-breed was so clever?'

Anger ignites my blood, but I don't fire my weapon. Not yet. My stepmother is a Crusader, which is reason enough for me to hate these

anti-monarchists. I'm not on board with the king's Loyalist groupies either – even though Elvira and her father are Loyalists. I have zero interest in Rhyborian politics.

'What do you want?' Liberty says. 'And make it quick – we've got better things to do than stand around listening to insults from idiots.'

The older male wehr sneers then spits at my feet. With his steely gaze, grizzled beard and creased complexion, he looks like a battle-hardened war veteran.

'Bounty better be worth it, Dinella,' he growls.

Blaster fire from the front of the Starlifter interrupts the exchange.

Zrip! Zrip!

Dinella smiles. 'You had a couple of friends hiding in the front, did you?'

'Yes,' Caspian says through gritted teeth. 'My wife—'

'Sooooo sad,' Dinella says.

'— and an assassin,' Liberty finishes.

Dinella's mouth twitches as her male companions trade glances.

'Brutus!' she calls. 'Ailin!'

No answer. The only sound is the roaring flames of the fireball consuming Helion's chopper.

'Want to wager whose "friends" lost out?' Liberty says.

Dinella purses her lips and turns towards the burning chopper. A distraction? I tighten my grip on my blaster but keep my eyes on her. But then I understand. She's looking for the rider that blew up the helicopter. She's lost two wehrs already, losing another one would leave her just these two here with her.

A shadow passes over the ground behind the three Crusaders. A dragon-shaped shadow.

Caspian raises his blaster as the trio spins round. I squint through the smoke haze as he opens fire on the dragon.

Gemini hops into view and lands between Liberty and her father. 'Stop!' he yells, clutching Caspian's forearm and forcing it down. 'That's Elvira you're shooting at!'

'Elvira?' I say, catching the assassin under the armpit to steady him. 'How did *she* get here?'

A limp body drops from Elvira's claws and lands heavily on the ground. Dinella spins round to face us again, a grimace of rage stretched across her face at losing her third companion. She points her weapon directly at me.

'No!' Liberty cries as she lunges in front of Gemini towards me.

She crashes into my chest, wrapping her arms around me. We fall as the hum of the blaster fills my ears. Liberty groans and loosens her grip on me.

Elvira roars.

I twist, landing on my hands and knees as Caspian hooks his hands under Liberty's armpits. Liberty's head lolls to one side. Her eyes are closed.

'No!' I yell, reaching for her as Caspian yanks her away.

Neither of the two male wehrs move as their leader steps up to finish her job. I ignore the blaster that is less than a metre from my head now and focus on Liberty. My hand clutches at her jacket as Caspian pulls her away and I just miss the collar. Instead, I get the silver chain around her neck, which snaps – sending her half-dollar pendant skidding down the ramp.

Grim hisses as he skedaddles, then Caspian stumbles over the retreating feline. Caspian lands heavily on his backside with Liberty's limp form flopping across his legs.

'Caspian! Move!' Gemini says.

Before I make another grab for Liberty, I glance at our assassin who has his weapon pointed directly at her. The female wehr pauses, her gaze now on Gemini too.

Caspian glares at Gemini, refusing to move. 'What the hell are you doing? Are you crazy?'

Elvira swoops, clutches Caspian's left arm and drags him clear. Gemini squeezes the trigger and Liberty disappears.

'What the hell,' I whisper. 'Why—'

'Necessary,' Gemini says sharply.

I swipe Liberty's half dollar off the floor and stuff it in my pocket. Then I rip the squidger from Gemini's grasp and point it at him.

Gemini glances at the weapon. ‘You take good care of that. I might be able to save her.’

Save her?

Realisation hits. Liberty groaned after she was hit so she wasn’t killed instantly. Perhaps by ‘storing’ her, Gemini has stopped her injury progressing. I twist the cartridge off the device and secure it in my pocket with Liberty’s coin.

A roar brings my attention back to the present. Elvira is spewing fire at the three remaining Crusaders. Gemini raises his blaster.

Zrip! Zrip! Zrip!

The three invaders shriek in surprise, clutch their injured hands to their chests and stare at their blasters – now lying in the dirt.

I turn to Gemini, who has taken smug to a whole new level.

‘You think you’re pretty clever, don’t you?’ I say.

‘Have I not mentioned that I’m a genius?’

I snort. ‘Not in the last five minutes.’

‘Genius. Assassin. Spy—’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I know.’

Elvira lands nearby as the three Crusaders scurry towards their trailbikes.

‘You going to let them get away?’ I say to Gemini.

‘Well, I’m not going to shoot them in the back,’ he says.

‘Dead men tell no tales,’ I say.

Gemini nods. ‘True, but ...’

‘You *want* them to tell Karina what happened here?’

‘I doubt they’ll admit to it,’ he says with a shrug. ‘But if they do – she won’t be happy about it.’

I scowl. ‘You mean she’ll be pissed off that they didn’t kill me.’

‘Yes.’

Elvira’s voice rings inside my head. *Are you okay?*

I glare at her. ‘What do you reckon?’

Rose pokes her head around a crate. ‘Where’s Liberty?’

I pull the squidger cartridge from my pocket and hand it to her. ‘In here.’

Rose frowns as she takes the cartridge. ‘Why?’

Caspian snakes his arm around his wife's waist as she plucks the cartridge from my hand. 'Come on, Rose,' he says, turning her towards the front of the aircraft. 'I can explain.'

Elvira waddles up the ramp to stand in front of me. She's a tiny dragon; the top of her head doesn't even reach my shoulders. Her cinnamon-coloured scales have a pearly sheen which makes them sparkle in the morning sunlight, and though her teeth and talons are gruesomely sharp, her glowing eyes look like little pots of dark caramel. Wisps of grey smoke curl from her nostrils, a reminder that she could roast me in an instant if she wished.

I tried to stop them. I'm sorry.

Elvira turns to Gemini and after a moment he nods.

Then, Elvira's voice is inside my head again. *We need to return this Starlifter to the king, Felix*, she says. *And since those Crusaders killed the king's pilots, Gemini will have to fly it back.*

'I think I'll walk,' I say.

'Feel free,' Gemini says.

'Your landings are bad enough at the best of times, Gemini,' I say, 'but this aircraft is so huge we could host a hockey game in here – *and* you've got a busted ankle.'

Grim leaps and lands on the crate nearest me. *Meow.*

'See,' I say, massaging the feline's ears, 'even Grim agrees.'

'You going to Shift, Elvira?' Gemini says.

Elvira shakes her scaly snout.

'You don't have a robe?' I say.

Dropped it somewhere out there, she says, pointing over her shoulder.

'Well,' Gemini says, 'let's move.'

'Yes,' I say. 'We need to find a surgeon for Liberty.'

'A team of surgeons,' Gemini says. 'A team of *brilliant* surgeons.'

I swallow the massive lump in my throat. If Gemini thinks it's going to take more than him to fix it, Liberty's injury is *really* bad.