

# PROLOGUE

## **Aiwan Mothership**

### **En route to Earth, somewhere in hyperspace ...**

Luna shook her head, grinning. As she admired the sleek contours of the Reaper's hull, she had to admit the prototype was impressive.

"I must say, when you disobey the king, you certainly do it with style," she quipped.

Standing on the grated bridge overlooking the mothership's cargo bay, Prince Kypa and Luna leaned against the metal railing and gazed at the Reaper. This was Luna's first glimpse of the prototype since it had been brought aboard. She approved the vessel's unique design; it was a vast departure from other Aiwan ships.

Noticing Kypa's silence, Luna glanced at her childhood friend, who was tapping his foot incessantly. She turned to face him. "Nervous?"

Kypa gave her a sidelong look then realized his tell and flattened his foot. "I am fine," he assured her. "Thank you."

Luna nodded but knew it to be untrue. It pained her that Kypa felt the need to carry this burden alone.

"We are taking an awful risk," she reminded him. "If you want to turn back ..."

“No, there is no turning back now,” Kypa insisted, saying it more for his own sake than hers. “I must see this through.”

Luna was right, Kypa admitted to himself. If the High Court discovered he had diverted precious resources away from Aiwa’s war-fighting efforts to build the Reaper, he could be charged with treason—a crime punishable by death.

Luna smiled warmly, respecting her friend’s unwavering devotion to their cause. Changing the subject, she remarked, “I am impressed by how well you kept all of this a secret. How did you manage it?”

“I had help,” he said with a sly smile. “Your cloaking technology proved quite useful.”

“Ah, so you are not alone in this after all?” She playfully punched his arm. “Glad I could contribute to your deviance. Does Commodore Boa know?”

Judging by Kypa’s feigned ignorance, Luna realized it was a silly question.

“Never mind,” she said dryly. “At least Captain Torga supports what we are doing.”

“Indeed,” Kypa said. “Torga hand-selected the crew, requiring each member to take the mission without knowing any details. He also logged a false flight plan so we could rendezvous with the Reaper in a discreet location, away from prying eyes.”

“It seems you have thought of everything.”

Kypa took a long breath. “I hope.”

A moment of silence passed. “You seem confident about this site,” Luna remarked without preamble.

Kypa nodded. “I am, actually. I have never seen readings so high,” he marveled. “The magnetarite deposits on this planet must be enormous. I just hope other harvesters have not discovered this world already.”

“Is it inhabited?”

“Unknown, but we will find out soon enough.” Kypa leaned against the railing once again, looking out at his creation. “Just think, Luna, if all goes to plan, we will bring back enough crystals for Boa’s fleet to defeat Krunig’s horde once and for all.” Kypa paused, imagining the possibility of peace restored to his people. “Then we will show everyone how the Reaper can rebuild our world.”

Luna cocked her eyebrow. “Everyone?”

Kypa gave her a determined look. “Yes, everyone,” he insisted. “Even my father will see the Reaper’s merits.”

Luna held his look with empathy. As a refugee of Cirros, she understood better than most that Kypa had been unfairly blamed for its destruction. But it was not the court of public opinion that troubled her friend.

As the former head of Aiwa's harvesting efforts, Kypa had done everything in his power to avert the quakes, but his warnings had fallen on deaf ears. Most notably, King Loka's, his father. Their relationship had never healed after that, not that they had been particularly close before the tragedy. Except now, in light of Kypa's theft of precious resources to fund his unauthorized science experiment, he would be hard-pressed to find support from anyone back home if this mission failed. With Aiwa's defenses weakening, and pressure to resume crystal harvesting at an all-time high, Kypa was right—the fate of their world depended on the Reaper.

The sound of a door opening interrupted their quiet conversation. Kypa and Luna both turned and spotted two handlers entering the empty cargo bin below. They were escorting a reptilian beast—an obercai—into the storage compartment, prodding it forward with long-handled electrodes tipped with blue energy arcs.

The obercai immediately sensed the presence of Kypa and Luna through its large nostrils and forked tongue. Homing in on their scents, the creature's beady, yellow eyes shot upward and locked on to them. Stopping to hiss, the obercai earned a zap in the back from one of the handlers. The beast protested, only to receive more jolts to quell its behavior.

Obercais were apex predators on Aiwa and, while highly dangerous, they made perfect beasts of burden for harvesting. They could survive underwater for long periods, even at crushing depths. And with their herculean strength, these beasts were able to move heavy objects, such as boulders, when powered equipment was unavailable or impractical.

There were obvious downsides to using obercais. They were cunning and lethal, even at a young age, and immune to Aiwan telepathy. This made domestication a tedious and dangerous affair.

Kypa recognized this particular obercai—a juvenile—from its dark scales and nasty disposition. He knew it to be early in the training process, this being the creature's first trip off-world.

Kypa and Luna watched as the handlers led the beast inside the bin directly beneath them. Once the door closed behind them, they activated a hologram to simulate an underwater excavation site.

"Let us leave them to their work," Kypa suggested after a few minutes of observing the training process through the open ceiling. "We should be getting close—"

Suddenly, the entire ship shuddered violently, knocking Kypa and Luna off balance. Kypa steadied himself against the railing, but Luna stumbled

backward. Unable to stop herself, she let out a scream as she fell over the railing.

Kypa snatched her wrist at the last second. Momentum nearly pulled him over the side with her, but he managed to plant his feet on the grated floor and stop them both from plummeting to their deaths.

Hanging upside down with her knees hooked over the railing, Luna found herself looking down at the obercai. They locked eyes and, in that dreadful moment, she saw the creature's predator instincts activate.

"Give me your other hand!" Kypa called down to her. He was bent over the railing, holding her left wrist firmly with both hands.

Luna focused her attention on Kypa. Ready to time her move, she felt something brush against her right hand as it dangled freely. Giving a sideways glance, Luna's bulbous blue eyes flashed at the sight of the obercai landing on its massive hind legs. A loud, metal thud echoed in the bay.

The obercai's first attempt to snag its prey fell short, which seemed to invigorate the beast. Smelling Luna's fear, the obercai readied to spring another attack when the two handlers intervened, jolting the creature with several electric shocks.

With the handlers distracting the beast, Luna rolled herself up so Kypa could grab her free hand and pull her to safety. As soon as she was back on solid footing, Luna threw her arms around Kypa's midsection, squeezing him tight.

Caught off-guard by this uncommon display of emotion, Kypa patted her back, trying to steady his trembling friend. "Easy," he soothed. "You are safe now."

As the words left his mouth, the ship shuddered once again. Kypa and Luna separated, each clinging to the handrails as the bridge wobbled beneath them.

An alarm sounded, and red emergency lights strobed throughout the cargo bay.

"Are we under attack?" Luna asked in a panic.

"Impossible," Kypa insisted, knowing they were in hyperspace.

The first thoughts to enter his mind were that some type of catastrophic mechanical failure had occurred, or perhaps the ship had struck debris in the hyperspace lane. While these were plausible theories, both scenarios were rare. His gut told him this was something else entirely.

The mothership shook again. Kypa and Luna exchanged knowing looks. This time, there was no mistaking the impact of disruptors against the ship's deflector shields. They were definitely under attack.

Below them, the obercai let out a deafening screech. Clearly agitated, the creature began lashing its tail and clawing at its handlers. Keeping the obercai at

bay proved difficult. With their backs to the exit, the handlers worked in unison to fend off the beast's advances with the electrodes. All the while, the obercai was learning, testing their defenses for weaknesses.

Three additional Aiwans appeared at the far end of the bay and came running across the bridge. Kypa waved them over and pointed to the obercai.

"Get down there and help secure that creature at once!" he ordered.

Peering over the railing, the new arrivals saw the handlers in danger. They raced into action, disappearing into the adjacent corridor.

Kypa tapped Luna on the arm. "Come on; we must get to the bridge."

They sprinted out of the cargo bay and toward the ship's bow.

As they ran through the main corridor, another violent blast rocked the ship, causing an overhead conduit to explode and shower their path with white-hot sparks. Kypa and Luna pulled up short as cables and metal panels fell from the ceiling. The corridor went dark, and then the emergency lights flickered on.

"This way!" Kypa urged.

He ducked into a nearby stairwell and hurtled down a flight of stairs with Luna close behind. Exiting the stairwell, he paused and scanned the corridor in both directions. Sensing no danger, they continued toward the front of the ship.

Along the way, Kypa heard rumblings outside that indicated the space battle had intensified. The mothership's disruptor cannons thundered in succession to repel the attackers while the deflector shields were hammered by incoming salvos. Judging by the ferocity of the exchange, and the fact their cargo hold was empty, Kypa did not believe this was a pirate raid. Their attackers had come for blood. Royal blood.

Even more troubling was that their attackers knew exactly how to find them in hyperspace. Only a handful of people were privy to their entry point and route. This meant only one thing—there was a traitor onboard.

Suddenly, a wall panel exploded beside Kypa. The force of the blast threw him against the opposite bulkhead and knocked Luna backward off her feet.

Temporarily stunned and ears ringing, Luna rolled over onto all fours and picked herself up slowly. Coughing from the acrid smoke in the air, she crawled to Kypa's side and brushed off remnants of smoldering debris from his aquasuit.

"Are you injured?" she asked.

Dazed, Kypa blinked several times, shaking off the effects. As he rolled onto his back, a sharp pain erupted in his abdomen. Kypa winced, hissing between gritted teeth. A metal fragment protruded out of his suit just below his ribs. Green blood oozed from the wound.

Luna grimaced at the sight of Kypa's ghastly injury. She helped ease his

head against the bulkhead. “You need a medic.”

Eyes closed, Kypa nodded. “The stairwell ... get the medical kit.”

“Try not to move,” Luna said, getting to her feet. She then doubled-back up the corridor.

Kypa watched her depart then pulled his blood-stained hand from his abdomen. The wound looked nasty. Closing his eyes, he focused on taking slow, steady breaths. Luna would be back soon with something to close the wound and numb the pain ... he hoped.

As the battle raged outside, the mothership shuddered from the onslaught, knocking Luna off stride. She steadied herself against the bulkhead and continued along the corridor until reaching the stairwell. Ascending the stairs two at a time, she reached the mezzanine and removed the medical kit from the wall. Just as she started to head back, a faint call caught her attention.

Luna paused, unsure if her mind was playing tricks on her. She listened for a long-held breath. The voice sounded like it had come from the main level, one flight up. It was difficult to discern over the rumblings of the battle outside and her own heart pounding in her ears.

Feeling the need to hurry, Luna turned to leave. Then she heard the voice again. The call was unmistakable. After a split-second of indecision, Luna felt compelled to investigate. She ran up the next flight of steps. Reaching the main level, Luna looked up and down the smoke-filled corridor. There was no sign of anyone, so she ventured to the right, heading aft.

“Hello? Is anyone there?” she called out.

No reply.

Luna continued a little further. With her eyes and lungs burning from the smoke, she called out once more, “Can anyone hear me?” She coughed.

Still no reply.

Chiding herself for wasting time, Luna sprinted back to the stairwell. In the back of her mind, she feared her detour had put Kypa in greater danger.

Kypa sensed something was wrong. Luna should have been back by now. He tried reaching out to her with telepathy but failed to connect. She was either too far away, unconscious, or dead.

Pushing that grim thought out of his head, Kypa let out a breath of frustration. With each passing minute, he grew more impatient. There was nothing he could do for Luna and the rest of the crew while he was stuck here on the floor, unable to move.

“Prince Kypa!”

Kypa turned sharply to find Mena, a young crewmember from the bridge, rushing to his side.

“Mena, thank goodness.”

“My Prince,” she said, catching her breath. “The captain sent me—” Mena stopped mid-sentence and gasped at the bloody shard protruding from Kypa’s abdomen.

Kypa ignored her reaction. “Are we under attack?”

His question went unanswered as Mena remained fixated on his wound.

“Mena!”

She snapped back to his question. “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. We were under attack,” Mena clarified. “The enemy ship was destroyed.”

Kypa considered this, shaking his head. “How bad are the damages?”

“Extensive, Your Highness. Shields are off-line. Propulsion is down to maneuvering thrusters only, and hull integrity in several sections has been compromised. The captain sent me to evacuate this level.”

“Where are we now?” Kypa winced.

Mena grimaced with empathy. “We just exited hyperspace and are nearing our destination.”

Kypa nodded. At least there was some good news. His thoughts jumped to Luna then the Reaper.

“Help me to my feet. We need to find Luna.”

Kypa stood carefully, steeling himself against the excruciating pain. Once he was on his feet, Mena wrapped Kypa’s arm around her neck.

“Luna went this way.” Kypa gestured aft.

They took two steps before another massive explosion rocked the ship. Up ahead, the hull ruptured, and sudden depressurization whisked Kypa and Mena off their feet, dragging them down the corridor.

Clawing frantically for anything to latch on to, Kypa managed to grab a hold of a metal handle outside one of the ship’s escape pods. Flailing about in mid-air like a kite in a storm, he looked over and spotted Mena clinging to a storage cabinet mounted on the wall. As the violent rush of air pulled them toward the cold vacuum of space, the cabinet lurched, and one corner detached from the wall.

“Mena!” Kypa shouted over the loud hiss of escaping air.

Mena had her claws dug into the cabinet, struggling to maintain a grip. Hearing Kypa’s call, she looked to her left and saw him on the opposite side of the hall.

Pumped with adrenaline, Kypa looped his arm around the grab handle and hugged it tight. Extending his free hand, he yelled, "Take my hand!"

Sensing the cabinet was about to give way, Mena realized she had one shot at this. She retracted the claws in her left hand and extended her arm as far as it could reach.

Mena and Kypa touched fingertips, establishing a mental connection. Then, as if in slow motion, their eyes locked. In that fateful moment, Kypa experienced Mena's fear and helplessness as she felt the cabinet break free from the wall. Suddenly, she was gone. Mena's screams echoed in the corridor as she was swept through a gaping hole in the ship's hull and out into space.

"No!" Kypa cried out in horror.

His heart crumbled, but his own danger left him no time for sorrow. Still suspended in mid-air, Kypa realized the escape pod was his only hope for survival.

"Computer, open pod five!"

"Warning," the ship's main computer replied evenly. "Mating collar compromised. Seal integrity dropping."

"Override, on my authority!" Kypa yelled. "Do it now!"

The escape pod's hatch slid open.

Thinking fast, Kypa knew there was an identical grab handle on the opposite side of the wall inside the pod. Fighting against the howling wind, Kypa brought his knees up to his midsection, careful to protect his abdomen, which screamed with every movement.

Kypa then hooked the back of his foot inside the open hatchway. Using what semblance of leverage he had, Kypa swung his torso around in a lightning-fast maneuver and managed to grab the handle inside the pod.

Now straddling the hatchway, Kypa paused to catch his breath. The overexertion and the stabbing pain from his wound had zapped the last of his energy. But the end was in sight. With one final push, he would be safe inside the pod.

At the end of the corridor, the hull breach remained unsealed due to a blockage. A piece of metal debris had wedged itself at the base of the blast doors, preventing them from closing. Just as Kypa prepared to maneuver himself into the pod, the debris suddenly dislodged. A warning alarm sounded, and the blast doors slammed shut, allowing the cabin to pressurize.

The force of escaping air abruptly ceased, catching Kypa by surprise. He lost his grip and fell awkwardly into the pod, landing hard on his side.

Rolling onto his back, Kypa howled in agony. Without thinking, he

wrapped his long fingers around the fragment protruding from his abdomen and angrily yanked it free. The pain was too much.

As his eyes rolled back in his head, the last thing he saw was the pod's hatch door closing.

Further up the corridor, Luna had been holding on for dear life in the stairwell when the chaos suddenly ended. The moment pressure was restored, Luna dropped face-first onto the floor.

Gathering herself, she slowly came to her feet. Her thoughts immediately turned to Kypa. Fearing the worst, she leapt down the stairs and landed by the open doorway. Entering the corridor, she found it deserted and littered with debris. Kypa was nowhere in sight.

Luna sprinted up the hall in search of her friend, daring to hope he was still alive. She passed the blood mark on the floor where she had last seen Kypa and continued to the end of the corridor. There, Luna reached the closed blast doors. Still no sign of him.

Backtracking, she ran to the control panel located outside pod five and activated the comm.

"Bridge, this is Luna."

A staticky reply followed. "Luna, this is Torga. Where are you?"

The sound of the captain's voice came as a welcomed relief. "Sub-Level One," she answered. "Is Prince Kypa with you?"

"Negative. I sent Mena to clear that level. Have you seen her?"

The mention of Mena gave Luna a glimmer of hope. Perhaps she had found Kypa and had helped him to safety.

Luna stepped away from the comm unit and called out to Mena at the top of her lungs. There was no response.

Returning to the comm, she replied, "No sign of them, Captain. I will keep looking."

In a passing glance, Luna noticed through the pod's window that the interior light was on. Curious, she peeked through the window. Her breath caught when she spotted Kypa lying on the floor, unconscious.

"Captain, I found the prince!" she reported. "He is inside pod five."

"Affirmative," Torga replied. He sounded relieved on that front, but they were far from out of danger. "Get in the—"

Torga's message cut out unexpectedly as an alarm sounded on the control panel. Luna jumped backward as the pod's blast door slid shut beside her, blocking access to it. She darted her eyes to the control panel where a warning

message signaled the pod's mating collar was about to fail.

Luna lunged for the intercom. "Kypa, wake up!" she screamed.

Activating the internal viewer, she could see Kypa still on the floor, motionless.

Luna yelled again, but he remained unresponsive. Seconds later, the lifeboat jettisoned. Kypa was gone.

Luna pounded her fist on the wall, cursing to herself. If only she had found him a minute sooner.

The mothership then entered Earth's upper atmosphere. Jolted from the impact, Luna was thrown off her feet. She hit her head against the bulkhead, and everything went black.

## **Planet Earth**

### **North Hamgyong Province, North Korea**

**30 December, 2355 Hours Local**

Luna awoke with a gasp, finding herself facedown, wedged into a corner. Her eyes fluttered as she lifted her head then propped herself up on one elbow. She groaned. Every part of her body ached.

Forcing her eyes to adjust, she noticed the area was deathly quiet and still, a ghost ship. Main power appeared off-line as the eerie glow of the emergency lights provided scant illumination. Yet, even in the darkness, Luna could see the ship's dreadful state of disrepair.

Nearby, a bundle of power cables dangled from the ceiling. The frayed wires popped loudly, sending electrical sparks dancing across the floor. In that flash of light, Luna discovered the mothership was either listing to port or she had a concussion, perhaps both.

She winced. *What happened?*

Luna came to her feet and staggered against the force of gravity, making her way to the control panel beside pod five. Seeing the blast door was closed, it reminded her of Kypa being jettisoned in the lifeboat. She had to find him.

Thumbing the commlink button, she called the bridge, "Captain Torga, this is Luna. Come in."

No reply.

"Captain Torga, do you read me? This is Luna."

Still no answer.

Growing frustrated, she jabbed the button repeatedly. "Hello, hello! Is anyone there?"

Luna gave up, letting out an exasperated breath.

Pinching her forehead to relieve a growing headache, she ran a quick diagnostic. The ship was running on emergency power. Main systems were off-line, including the comms, which meant no distress beacon.

She checked their location. The mothership had failed to achieve orbit and crashed on the planet's surface.

"Well, at least we are on the right planet," Luna commented wryly. "Computer, locate pod five."

A map of Earth appeared on the screen, showing the mothership's location in proximity to pod five. Luna's shoulders sank. The distance between her and Kypa was considerable; they were separated by a massive ocean.

Knowing the prince was in grave danger, Luna searched for options. Judging by the mothership's current condition, the chances of getting airborne seemed unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future.

"I suppose I could swim," she thought aloud. It was doable but would take time, possibly weeks. Kypa could be dead before she reached him. Then it dawned on her.

*The Reaper!*

Hoping it was still airworthy, she headed for the cargo bay. Surely she would find someone along the way she could inform.

She made her way cautiously in the darkness to a nearby stairwell. Ascending the steps, Luna retrieved another medical kit from the wall. She had no idea what had happened to the first one. Continuing up to the main level, she found the corridor in shambles with collapsed ceiling beams and debris blocking her path.

"Luna?" a hoarse voice called.

Luna rounded sharply to find Captain Torga limping toward her. He looked battered and bruised with a deep gash on his forehead.

"Captain, thank goodness!" Seeing his condition, Luna opened the medical kit and started dressing his wounds. Torga did not resist.

"It is good to see you, Luna. I feared the worst." He searched the corridor behind her. "Where is Prince Kypa?"

"Jettisoned in pod five," she answered, making an effort to hold her voice steady. "He was seriously wounded. We need to find him."

Torga nodded thoughtfully, unsure at the moment just how they could accomplish such a feat. He also wanted to continue his search for survivors. He had discovered several bodies; Luna was the first live crew member he had encountered.

Luna read his expression. “Let me take the Reaper, Kypa’s prototype vessel,” she suggested. “I can rescue Kypa then return home and bring help.”

“Good idea. Let us hope it is still in one piece. I—”

Torga paused, sensing movement behind him. He rounded slowly as a low hiss threatened from the shadows. The color drained from his face when he saw the obercai crouched before him.

Knowing his fate was sealed, Torga waved his arms above his head to make himself appear bigger. Then he turned his head sideways and yelled, “Luna, run!”

Wasting no time, the hulking beast attacked. The obercai pounced on Captain Torga, tackling him to the ground and knocking Luna against the bulkhead.

“Run!” the captain screamed as the beast tore into his chest.

Horrified, Luna fled in a panic. Barreling toward the front of the ship, she expected the obercai to be on her at any second.

Reaching a junction in the corridor, Luna paused. She could either continue forward to the bridge or turn left toward an exit leading outside.

*Get off the ship!* her mind screamed.

Luna made for the hatch door. Behind her, she could hear the beast’s claws rattling on the grated metal floor as it thundered in pursuit.

“Computer, open the outer door!”

The ship’s computer acknowledged, and the blast door slid upward. Natural light spilled into the area, along with a frigid blast of cold air and powdery snow that blanketed the ground outside.

Luna leapt from the ship. As soon as she was clear, she rounded to see the obercai overshoot the exit and skid to a halt inside.

“Computer, close the door!”

The obercai recovered, but it was too late to reach its prey before the heavy door screeched to a close and sealed shut.

Luna backpedaled, heart pounding in her chest. She listened to the beast as it clawed wildly on the opposite side of the door. Eventually, it gave up and moved on.

Oblivious to the blizzard conditions around her, Luna stared numbly at the black hull of the mothership. Gradually, her pulse slowed, and the bitter cold registered. Luna blinked back to reality. Shielding her face from the harsh winds, she circled in place, taking in her surroundings. Visibility was limited, but she noticed a thick forest behind her that could offer protection from the elements.

Then came a faint sound in the distance. It took Luna a moment to

distinguish the mechanical noise over the howling winds. As the two North Korean Mi-24 attack helicopters approached, she realized the sound was not coming from nature.

*This planet is inhabited!*

In a moment of indecision, Luna considered reentering the ship and taking her chances with the obercai. However, the gruesome memory of Captain Torga's fate made her reconsider. Instead, she turned and ran for the forest.

The helicopters appeared moments later. They loitered overhead for several minutes, shining searchlights down on the mothership while Luna remained safely hidden in the tree line. She was huddled behind a large tree, shaking uncontrollably. Her aquasuit compensated for the freezing conditions and warmed her body, yet she could not stop shivering.

Luna took a deep breath to calm her nerves and formulate a plan. If a distress signal had not been sent, it would be quite some time before the mothership was considered overdue. A rescue seemed unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Then there was the Reaper. To get to it meant facing the obercai, and there was no way she was going back inside now. Guilt prodded her to try to warn the crew, but she remembered the comms were down. There was no way to broadcast a message from outside. Besides, for all Luna knew, she was the lone survivor.

Her only apparent recourse was to find Prince Kypa. She knew his general whereabouts, which was a start. With any luck, he was still alive and had called for help. Perhaps, by the time she reached him, a rescue ship might already be there. It was a slim hope, but enough to get her moving.

As the helicopters continued their reconnoiter, Luna stole away and began her trek through the wooded mountainside. The sooner she reached the ocean, the better. There was no telling what dangers lurked on the surface of this alien world.