



**LAST GATE
OF THE EMPEROR**

THE ROYAL TRIALS

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CHAPTER ONE

0645 ST, Harar Station, Axum

The shrieking alarm caught me with my pants down. Literally. Look, I don't like telling you any more than you like hearing it, but the truth is the truth. And my Royal Education Adviser and Reminder constantly begs me to tell the honest truth. Not boast, brag, or stretch it in any way. And I don't know about you, but I listen to my REAR.

"Azaj, what's going on?" I asked, fumbling with my formal flight suit. It's hard to put on a uniform while hovering upside down in midair. More on that in a second.

The Harar's minister of the palace—an AI assistant that lived in Axum's servers—appeared as a translucent hologram in front of me and frowned. "It appears that you need help dressing, among other things."

"Not my status—the station!" I snapped. "What's the emergency?"

The hologram sniffed. Can holograms sniff? Azaj, when

it had to appear in front of people, took on the image of a thin older man with a pencil-thin graying mustache and a shimmering green shamma. The long cloth twisted and wrapped around the AI in a formal pattern, an arrangement I couldn't hope to imitate. I should know, because it's what I was currently wrangling with.

Upside down, again. I promise I'll explain why in a second.

"I shall brief you once you've extricated yourself from your current predicament. As an aside, Her Royal Highness—your mother—instructed me to collect you. And to, I quote, 'tell him to stop trying to cheat. He'll still lose during family game night, regardless of whatever hacks he uploads to his nefasi.'"

I folded my arms and glared at the hologram, but Azaj merely lifted an eyebrow. I guess it's hard to appear intimidating when you're wearing nothing but high-tech undies and floating upside down.

"I wasn't trying to cheat," I grumbled.

Explanation time, because I don't want anyone saying Yared the Gr8 is a cheater. I have to protect my rep—people already thought I got an unfair advantage, what with being a prince and all.

I was currently hovering high above the Meshenitai simulation room. It was a large oval space the size of a field. The

walls sloped out and up in a gentle curve, with silver lines forming a checkered pattern against the soft gray. When activated, the room could simulate any environment, under any conditions you could think of. Want to pilot a powered exoskeleton (exo for short) around a tropical island? What about through an abandoned battle cruiser that crashed on a moon? The possibilities were endless, and I spent hours coming up with different scenarios. Days sometimes. Just . . . me. By myself. Coming up with ridiculous tasks and trying to complete them.

The Ibis used to help me program them, but ever since she started her Meshenitai astrogator training, she had less and less time to hang out. Uncle Moti used it to train Meshenitai in different maneuvers, but he'd been called away for some important meeting a few days ago. I hadn't seen him since. In fact, I hadn't really seen anyone over the past few days. Even Besa, my bionic lioness turned Guardian, a half-ton bodyguard with diranium claws and a ticklish spot behind her ears, was gone a lot. Something about getting new claw upgrades. I don't know, that cat was always getting her nails done.

The point is I was . . . I was lonely. There. I said it. Nobody tells you that being a prince means missing gaming sessions with friends because you have to learn protocol. So to help out, Mom, the Empress, came up with family game

night. I got to pick the game, and we all—me, Uncle Moti, Dad, Mom, the Ibis, and Besa—would trek to the simulator and laugh, eat snacks, and game.

Nobody also told me that Mom was a genius when it came to capture the flag. Seriously. It was borderline unbelievable. Have you ever played CTF in an exo? You have to stay on your toes, and Mom was a pro.

So that's why I was in there, late for dinner, upside down in my nefasi as the mysterious alarm blared and the simulation froze. Practice. Not that Azaj cared. The virtual minister's responsibilities—making sure every part of Axum Station ran smoothly—didn't include listening to my excuses.

By the way the hologram was tapping a virtual finger impatiently, a certain newly discovered prince was complicating things.

You can take the boy out of Addis Prime, but you can't take Addis Prime out of the boy.

“Just give me two seconds, Azaj, and I'll be ready. They gave me a defective shamma. Am I supposed to wrap it over the arm or under the arm?”

“You're supposed to be on the ground right side up when you put it on,” the AI said drily.

“That's boring.” I finally managed to pull the cloth into position and grinned. “See? Just your esteemed presence helps me out. By the way, have you seen my REAR?”

Azaj winced. “I wish you wouldn’t call it that.”

“‘Every good prince’s REAR should always be right behind him,’” I quoted from the orientation holo vid I had to watch when the adviser bot was assigned to me. “‘Backing him up.’”

Azaj scowled, then the hologram straightened at its edges. It began to shimmer. “It appears I am being summoned. Possibly because of the station-wide alert that was just issued. I would suggest, my prince, that you familiarize yourself with station protocols before leaving your quarters. And not just the ones that are in place during an emergency. Day-to-day ones, such as dressing in appropriate attire, are also important. I will send your REAR—oh, teff of the saints, now he’s got me calling it that. Your *adviser* should be along shortly.”

With that, the AI palace minister disappeared, and so did the grin on my face. There was so much I didn’t know about being a prince. Sooner or later, it was going to catch up with me. I just hoped it wouldn’t be in front of anyone.

Okay, you guys, I’m back with another update. I hope you all liked the last one. It felt kinda nice talking to y’all, even though you can’t talk back. Anyway, enough of that dull stuff. Listen up, here are Yared’s Top Ten Facts You Didn’t Know about Being a Space Prince:

1. Talking!

Everybody wants to talk to me. Wait, I don't think that's right. Everybody wants to talk AT me. It's like all the newsvid reporters want to talk to the new prince about Axum and what my daily routine is and stuff like that. I think one group even sent a camera-drone by one-way courier rocket to have it follow me around for a day in the life of Prince Yared.

But no one actually wants to have a conversation with me, you know? It's like, they don't want to talk to Yared—just “the prince.” Does that makes sense? Anyway.

2. Space!

Not the stars and planets and that asteroid I got to name. (Hope you like the Haji-0043 vids I linked.) I'm talking about all the room there is aboard the Harar. That's the name of the top section of the Axum capital space station. There are two more modules still missing, and we're heading to find one of them, Adwa, now. Maybe there will be a bunch of kids living there when we arrive. It'd be nice to have some people in all this space. I mean, yeah, it's cool to have my own room and not hear Uncle Moti snoring and Besa having that one dream where she fights a bunamech for the last bulb of lubricant oil. But it'd be nice to have some more people to hang out with in all this space, too.

Wow, this is getting kind of sad. That's not the point of these updates! Okay, the next one should be really cool.

3. Medical tattoos!

Okay, technically they're miniature med-drones that are assigned to check my vitals, give me vitamins, and make sure I have the latest antibiotics. But still. They draw them onto your skin, and you can pick the pattern you want! It's only right, since no one really likes robugs crawling around them. (That name is patent-pending, by the way, so don't steal it.)

The robugs are super important, apparently, because did you know there are, like, millions of things that can get you sick if you travel the galaxy? It's like every world has their own version of the flu and they're just itching to give it to you.

Anyway, that's it for now. I gotta go; there's somebody coming. I'll drop this off at the next Nexus uplink I see. Later, guys!

My REAR found me frozen in a desert.

No, seriously, I'm not joking. All the birr a royal allowance provided, and I couldn't get a decent holosim to work. There I was, Prince Yared of Axum—an empire of advanced technology and sparkling ingenuity—floating helplessly two hundred meters up in the air.

Upside down, mind you!

The harness of my nefasi, the backpack I lined with anti-gravity padding, held me high above the space station's sim chamber floor. Technically I wasn't supposed to be here. The Meshenitai, fabled warriors and protectors of Axum, trained here. Battle scenarios, space station defense, rescue strategies—they all could be programmed to play out in thousands of different environments. If my uncle Moti—excuse me, General Moti Berihun, commander of the Burning Legion of Axum—caught me here, I'd be doing laps around the docking ring for hours.

Good thing he was off chasing space pirates.

Although . . . I could've used his help right then. Anyone's help, actually. I was using one of the Meshenitai sims to do a little training of my own. Not that I needed it, but the the Royal Trials were days away, and I'd just learned it was going to be a Trios format. Three teammates.

I'd just gotten used to having *one* partner, and now I had to have two! Hopefully the Ibis and Fatima would get up to speed quickly. I'd assumed they'd want to join my team. Why wouldn't they? Two Meshenitai (well, one Meshenitai and one new recruit) plus me, the greatest gamer that ever crossed the stars? We couldn't lose! Good thing I scheduled an impromptu training session and messaged them about it in the middle of the night. They hadn't responded yet,

which was weird, but maybe they were just too excited and stayed up all night watching the Royal Trials level reveal like I did. Now I just had to wait until they showed up and we could start training.

After they rescued me.

I sighed. I'd been doing fine! But apparently the Meshenitai training sims weren't configured with the latest patches from, well, any game played in the last century. Let alone the new Royal Trials levels. So I took the liberty of uploading them, tweaking them a bit to provide more of a challenge, and here we were! The perfect training sim!

Well, at least until the desert level glitched around me. My nefasi was just about to respond to the new level pick-ups (I added a turbo boost for fun) when, all of a sudden, the sim froze.

I couldn't move. I could only stare at the wonderfully rendered environment—the sandstorm threatening to engulf me was delightful—as I waited to be rescued. But any moment now the Ibis or Fatima or even Besa, my bionic mouse catcher/lioness/Guardian, would arrive and—

“Selam, my prince!” a cheerful voice said behind me.

I sighed. Maybe being rescued was overrated. “About time, Doombot.”

A silver pyramid-shaped bot buzzed into my upside-down view. Gold lines swept diagonally down and around

its surface, and the faint blue glow of its antigrav thrusters gave it a majestic look. Too bad it was just a glorified snitch.

“I’m glad the Azaj sent me to you,” Doombot said. I named my REAR that as a joke, but since I always happened to get in trouble whenever it popped up, the name stuck. “According to my logs, it appears you have avoided my carefully laid schedule for today’s events. I am here to rectify that.”

“Can’t help you there, Doombot. I’m super busy.”

Doombot bobbed in the air and waited. Silence fell. I folded my arms and tried to whistle, but have you ever tried to whistle upside down? It’s impossible. Just a few spluttering raspberries and a glob of drool. And you never want to drool while upside down.

After several seconds passed, Doombot spun in a circle. “Are you still—”

“Still busy!” I said, wiping my face. “My friends should be here any minute.”

“Ah! If you are referring to the newest Meshenitai recruit—”

“The Ibis.” I nodded.

“—and her trainer—”

“Fatima, too.”

“—and your Guardian—”