

**LAST GATE
OF
THE EMPEROR**





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**KWAME MBALIA
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TO THE BLACK CHILDREN OF THE DIASPORA, WHO HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THE FUTURE

—KWAME MBALIA

*TO ARIANA, ADEY, YOKSHAN, LEAH, AND EPHREM. AND
ALL THE CHILDREN OF ETHIOPIA; YOU STAND ON THE SHOULDERS
OF HER RICH PAST, WITH HER BRIGHT FUTURE IN YOUR EYES.*

—PRINCE JOEL MAKONNEN



Audio Transcript File No. 2132.019

Location: [UNDISCLOSED DETENTION FACILITY]

Time: 00:45

Subject: Yared [LAST NAME REDACTED FOR SECURITY]

Auditor: Now, then. Start from the beginning. Again. For the third time. State your name for the audio file.

Me: Yared.

Auditor: *Full name.*

Me: Yared [REDACTED].

Auditor: . . .

Me: Listen, I didn't name myself. If I did, my last name would be 'TheGr8.' One word. And a number.

Auditor: . . .

Me: I even tried to change my name at school. They wouldn't let me. Ask them.

Auditor: We have. Speaking of, we pulled your school records and—

Me: Perfect, right? Stellar student, incredibly smart with tons of potential.

Auditor: —you barely attend class.

Me: . . .

Auditor: . . .

Me: Whaaaaat? No way. I go to class! All the time! Right there, at . . . at . . .

Auditor: Addis Prime Primary.

Me: Exactly. Addis Prime Primary. Good old . . . AP Squared. That’s what we call it for short. AP Squared.

Auditor: Enough of these games, boy! You *will* start telling us everything you know.

Me: Oh, that’s easy; I’ve got top marks in the class. My history teacher said my presentation was absolutely incredible. In fact, if not for the weird creature that nearly destroyed half the city, my presentation would have been the most exciting thing to happen all day.

Auditor: *Finally.* Let’s talk about that.

Me: My presentation? Gladly!

Auditor: No, the mon—

Me: It started like this . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Once there was an empire that stretched across the galaxy. Great. Noble. Wardens of peace and good fortune, they spread wealth and technology throughout the stars. This empire was called Axum.

When Axumite ships landed in a new star system and made contact with the residents, they offered to teach them, to bring them into the Empire, sharing their knowledge and power. That was how their empire continued to grow. All sentient races and species were invited, and though some did refuse, many accepted.

But of those that accepted entry into the Empire, there was one that grew jealous. These people coveted Axum's technology, for they came from a barren planet whose resources had been exhausted, and they longed to take to the stars to find new riches to exploit. But they didn't want to share . . . they wanted to rule.

They were called the Werari.

The Werari bided their time, waiting until Axum was

distracted with the Emperor and Empress's new baby . . . and then they struck. Using stolen Axumite technology, they conquered one peaceful planet after another. Planets. Space stations. Asteroid colonies. The Werari enslaved them all, then continued across the galaxy like unstoppable conquerors. And to help, they unleashed a terrible monster, a creature of such hatred and violence that none could stand in its way.

Its name was the Bulgu.

But the Emperor and Empress of Axum fought back. Their bodyguards were the legendary Meshenitai, unparalleled warriors who wielded curved shotels wreathed in black flame. The Meshenitai were fierce. They fought like demons, with incredible speed and power. The Axumite army, the Living Flames of the Burning Legion, defended their nation until the bitter end.

And it *was* a bitter end.

Just when it looked like Axum would prevail, a traitor—someone known and loved by the royal family—robbed them of their source of strength: the power that let the mighty nation travel between the stars. Axum was trapped, and they and the Werari fell into a war of attrition. It was a stalemate. The battle stretched over months, then years, with no one really winning but no clear loser. It is said that even today the Emperor and Empress still fight,

together with their Meshenitai. They stand firm beneath the onslaught of the Bulgu. But without their source of strength, neither they nor the Werari could travel through space, and the two warring nations fell into darkness and out of history.

“And that’s what shooting stars are,” I said, looking out over the integrated virtual classroom. “Whenever you see one in the night sky, it’s the Meshenitai and the Werari still battling high above our heads, granting you the power to reach for the sky . . .”

“Thank you, Yared,” came a voice from the corner.

“Which is why . . .” I continued, “I am asking for the Authority Net flight restrictions to be discontinued. How can we reach for the sky if our hands get zapped? Everyone deserves flying rights above the ridiculous ten-meter limit. There are hundreds of drones just waiting to harass kids like me—it’s despicable.”

“Yared,” Mrs. Marjani warned.

“Seriously, who do they think they are? How are we supposed to make it to school on time if the streets are clogged in the mornings and a dutiful student can’t fly a skysail over them? Does the Authority hate school?”

The lights in the class came on, and I blinked twice. Mrs. Marjani, one of my favorite teachers, actually, frowned at

me as she walked to the front of the class. Even though it looked crowded, only twelve of the seventy-five students attending the lecture were physically present. It was the strangest thing, and I'd only been at Addis Prime Primary for a month, so it took some getting used to.

Well, let me take that back. The school itself was cool. Addis Prime Primary had been converted from an old factory overlooking a giant lake just inside New Oromia, the largest city on the space colony Addis Prime. Massive conveyor belts ran through huge vaulted tunnels underground to the shopping district, and utility drones buzzed in and out throughout the day, picking up supplies for the school. Do you know what that means? That means *if* someone was so inclined, they could hitch a ride on a floating metal bug the size of a cow, and take it all the way to the largest collection of goods and delicacies this side of the galaxy.

If they were so inclined.

I would never do that, not during school hours. Even if the most important game tournament in my life was taking place *in that shopping district* in less than an hour. No, that would be irresponsible. Rules, you know?

At my old school on the other side of the colony, every student had to attend, no matter how far away they lived. Here, the majority of the students were virtual. They were

represented by drones or, if their families could afford it, holographic displays. Sometimes even the teachers were virtual. Unfortunately, not Mrs. Marjani. She marched silently forward, passing through two small, beetle-like drones—Haji and Kofi—that were wrestling in midair. She ignored them and stopped in front of me.

“Absolutely incredible,” she said. Mrs. Marjani was a tall, short-haired woman from the highlands of Tigray Central. The light of the holoprojector with my presentation tinted her dark skin blue, giving her a magical aura. She was the most popular teacher at Addis Prime Primary. She was also the strictest.

“Thank you!” I said, smiling.

“It is absolutely incredible that you decided to give a presentation with no historical basis or relevancy. I mean, honestly, Yared. Did you even do the research? I asked you to present on the regional differences between New Oromia and Tigray Central, and you had a whole month! Instead you come back with . . . with fairy tales?”

“This is history! And I worked so hard on it. I sat with my uncle Moti every night for a week, pulling that story out of him. Do you know how many sambusas I had to fry? How many cups of tej I had to pour for him? My fingers are going to smell like oil and honey for a month.”

The class snickered. Mrs. Marjani pointed at my

workstation. “Sit,” she said, squeezing the single word through gritted teeth.

As I walked back to my seat, Haji’s drone buzzed over and sat on my shoulder. “Way to go, Yared,” came a tiny voice. The drone’s speaker was barely audible. “She looks like she’s ready to explode. I thought you said you were going to give a presentation so good she’d let you go home early. The game starts in forty-five minutes. If you’re late, the admins will—”

I flicked the drone aside. He didn’t need to tell me how important the upcoming game was. His number-one ranking wasn’t on the line. “I know, I know. Trust me, I’ve got this. Any second now.”

Mrs. Marjani was still lecturing me from the front of the class. “And if you applied an ounce of effort to your studies, instead of your ridiculous exploits, you might actually pass this class and others.”

“But the story—” I began to say.

“Is not true,” Mrs. Marjani snapped. Was it just me or did she look angrier than I’d ever seen her? And . . . nervous? But I couldn’t linger on that too long; she was still lecturing me. “And I am not putting up with your shenanigans today. Report to independent study. I expect a full *revised* presentation on the history of Addis Prime by tomorrow morning. Dismissed. The rest of you, screens out. Please load the holovid labeled 2109-A.”

Everyone groaned. A few people shot angry glares my way. I didn't meet their eyes. This was my fourth school in two years, and it looked like I'd spend my time here like I did at all the others.

Alone.

Independent study was in a large room in the center of the school equipped with study pods so students could focus on exams or final projects. It was silent as a crypt, and the only door was monitored by securi-drones that would set off an alarm if they caught you trying to sneak out.

However, the study hall *also* happened to be right next to one of the underground conveyor tunnels. With multiple windows overlooking the entrance. I hid a smile as I gathered up my things. I may not have made many friends yet, but I *was* closer to fame and glory. This afternoon, when everyone found out who I really was? My name would be written in the stars.

I winked at Haji's drone and walked out of class. I loved this school.

I hated this school.

"Why did they have to serve yasa tibs for lunch?" I said with a groan.

There I was, clinging to a tiny ledge two stories off the ground, a skinny brown boy two inches from toppling into

a garbage chute, trying to plot how I was going to avoid falling into fish bones and spicy sauce to achieve my plan.

It was the middle of the day. I was hot and sweaty, and my partner in crime was being a giant baby. Although the securi-drones hadn't spotted me slipping out the window, the cleaning bots were on a roll.

Literally.

Their massive magnetized brushes swept dirt and attracted scraps, and if they caught me outside the classroom, the four-armed robotic custodians with massive wheels instead of legs would start their chase, brushes spinning, ready to grab me like a crumpled piece of trash and carry me off to the headmistress's office to earn a bunch of demerits. Part humanoids, part cars, 100 percent snitches. Nothing good would come from being spotted. The school would call my uncle Moti (again) and I'd get a stern lecture (also again) filled with several long sighs and a couple of head shakes, and . . . Look, no one wants that. Even now, three bots patrolled the hallway just inside the window.

Luckily, they hadn't seen me yet.

Unfortunately, they had detached their brushes and were carrying large trash cans filled with lunchtime leftovers, ready to deposit them through the chute your intrepid hero (me) currently hid in, where it would flow down and into one of the city's many automated hovercans. I'd tried to

gunk up their gears by tossing a few styluses at their wheels when they weren't looking (speaking of which, I was going to have to borrow a stylus when I came back), and it slowed them for a bit, but now they all clustered together. Sneaking back into the study hall at this point would be risky. Dangerous, even. Especially when the hovercan was way behind schedule.

I looked down and groaned. Where was that silly thing?

I only had thirty minutes left to register and get to the site for the game. The Hunt for Kaleb's Obelisk—or the HKO, as we all called it—was a massive augmented reality tournament. And though it was the best game to ever exist, the people who ran it, the game admins, were sticklers about punctuality. That was because the game was played in public. The locations rotated, and you only got a code if you were in a specific spot at a specific time. If you didn't make it, sorry, better luck next time. Any and all points you'd earned were wiped and you were dropped to the bottom of the rankings. And since the top-two ranked players could rake in a fortune in prize money, there was no way I was going to be late.

I looked below, trying to find my hovercan ride in all the chaos. Addis Prime spread out around me in a carpet of muddled brown and dingy gray. The school stood on a hill, so I could see each of the woredas, the districts of

Addis Prime, and the traffic flowing in and out of them. Hovertrucks piled high with mangos and all kinds of chilis and papayas headed to the Gebeya to be sold in market stalls. Floating rickshaws honked their way through, carrying important, well-dressed people into Authority Central at the very middle. Night-shift workers shuffled onto crowded buses to head home. Simple drones floated in front of each of the oval transports, flashing the route and kebele the bus would take. Loud coffee vendors, in their fluttering pedal carts, boasted about the strength of their beans and waved steaming jebenas in the air, ready to pour the perfect cup.

I clung to my handholds on the tiny ledge, trying to see if the blue of the sky would finally peek through the clouds. But all I saw was the occasional spark of the Net that supposedly kept us safe.

Right. Safe.

Anyway.

The Authority Net floated high in the sky. Technically, it was a giant swarm of insect-like drones, all linked to one another and hearing the same instructions from the giant transmitter outside the entrance to New Oromia, where the Authority was headquartered. Each drone was the size of my arm, and bristling with stun turrets that fired immobilizing electric beads. One hit from those and you were

frozen in an electric stasis field until someone came to release you. And believe me, they take their sweet time.

Remind me to tell you about that sometime.

The drones bobbed up and down and leaked metallic smoke that billowed above Addis Prime, so we rarely saw the sky. It also really, *really* messed with reception.

One day when I was bored (I'm always bored), I scrolled through my school-issued tablet and found an old picture of a large, nearly transparent creature that apparently lived in the ocean. It was named a jellyfish. Strange. Sometimes they would travel in groups and the water currents would make them float away. That's what the Net reminded me of, except instead of being carried off, they lingered overhead, keeping an eye on us for the Authority . . . and blocking everything else out, like the worst filter ever.

The Authority ruled Addis Prime, stiff and stern and no-nonsense. As far as I could tell, they were all adults in gray-and-white uniforms. They made up new rules constantly and tried to catch you breaking them, because disobedience was big business. More fines, more birr to pay. No running through the streets. No shouting or playing or backflips in public. And worst of all, no unauthorized flying. If you were caught entering the no-fly zone, ten meters above the ground, without the correct papers, *zap!* The drones would hit you with a stasis field, and they'd haul

your frozen butt off to face serious consequences. So no flying.

No flying? Really?

I mean, really . . . what kind of stupid rule is that? Yeah, you could get permits, but those cost money. Surprise! Who would've guessed? Everyone who could afford the authorization had sails these days. Skysails, moonsails, even sunsails. If you didn't have one of the newest models of the powered glider, you just weren't cool. But, no birr in Yared's account (okay, Uncle Moti's account) meant no skysail, no authorization, and no hope.

Unless I got creative. Besides, piloting a skysail out of the school's window to the HKO would have definitely drawn too much attention. However, no one said anything about falling slowly into an unsuspecting ride.

Yared, one; the system designed to keep him down, zero.

The only problem was that when I came up with this plan to skip school by jumping in a robo-driven trash can, I was supposed to have my nefasi with me. I'd built the special backpack with leftover thrusters and antigrav padding from Uncle Moti's workshop. Nothing like being able to carry your school supplies *and* hang out a few meters in the air.

But last night, the power to the factory we'd converted into a home cut off again, and the engineers hadn't started repairs yet. Without a charge, the nefasi was useless, so I'd

left it behind. All of this was annoying, but the worst part was Uncle Moti. He hadn't even complained. He just sighed and got dressed for work. Uncle Moti liked to stay on the right side of the law and not cause any fuss. It got on my nerves. Sometimes you had to shake things up a bit!

That nefasi would've been useful because I modified it to hold extra weight. The extra weight currently clinging to my shoulders. With her claws. Remember the partner in crime I mentioned earlier? I was referring to my big diranium scaredy-cat, Besa. Yes, my best friend also happened to be a bionic cat. Technically, she was a lioness. She always tried to follow me everywhere, but you try hiding a giant feline while running an errand to pick up Sleep-Tree leaves for your uncle. She came up to my knees and her metallic skin gleamed bright silver. I normally kept her at home during the day. Unfortunately, she was my secret weapon for the HKO. And, just my luck, she was afraid of heights.

“Mrowr?”

“No,” I lied through gritted teeth. “You're fine. Not heavy at all.”

I could make this jump, no problem. I'd done it plenty of times before. But with a bionic mouse-hunter draped all over me? Yeesh, this was going to be a jump for the ages. Maybe I should've just tossed my hairless feline friend when I first hopped out the window.

“Mrrrrrow?” she whimpered.

“No, Besa, nooooo. Why would you say that? I would never toss you. We’re family!”

“Mrrow.”

“No, look. We’re going to jump together. Promise. I’m just waiting for the perfect time.”

You’d think something with nine lives and a diranium shell would take more risks.

“Mrrow.”

“Yeah, well, next time you can come up with the plan.”

Just then, a door slammed from inside the window. I pressed myself flat against the trash chute. Just what I needed. Witnesses.

“What are these cleaning bots doing all clumped up in the study hall? Most of them are still empty. Mrs. Marjani, please notify the manufacturer that they’re malfunctioning again.”

I froze. That was the headmistress’s voice. What was she doing here? *And* Mrs. Marjani! No, no, no—this was going to ruin everything.

A low boom sounded in the distance. The vibrations shook the tiny ledge. Besa dug her claws into my shoulder, and I winced. I strained, trying to listen in on the conversation slipping out the open window.

“Of course, Headmistress,” Mrs. Marjani replied.

Wait.

There was no problem. The adults just didn't realize the silly machines were doing their jobs trying to capture me—to glue me to their brushes like a piece of soggy injera and turn me in. Metallic traitors.

A low humming sound filled the air. I closed my eyes in relief. Finally. The hovercan rounded the corner, its antigrav thrusters growing louder. Almost time. I tensed, getting ready to make my escape while the headmistress sighed loudly.

“So our favorite new student isn't doing too well?”

“I'm giving him space to adjust,” Mrs. Marjani said slowly. “But the stories he tells in class, the ones he relays from his uncle . . .”

“Yes, the ones from your report. Hmm. The uncle is the guardian, correct? I received a note from him requesting another meeting. He wants to discuss next year's enrollment fees. I was planning on sending him the standard reply, but I wanted to wait for a report on the boy's progress. It seems he might not be cut out for this.”

“Perhaps if I could work with him one-on-one—”

“No, we discussed this. We don't have the resources for that. Your class size is large enough as it is. No, I'll send the response. School policy, prompt payments to be expected, and so on and so forth. If I have to read one more message

begging for more time to pay . . .” The headmistress cleared her throat, probably realizing she was complaining. “Yes, well. Thank you for this latest report, Mrs. Marjani.”

Uncle Moti was . . . begging? For me?

My head drooped as anger and embarrassment filled my chest.

“Yes, Headmistress,” Mrs. Marjani replied, her voice resigned. I felt as if I’d let her down. Maybe I should’ve worked a bit harder on that presentation. When I got back from the tournament, I would redouble my efforts.

“That kid is really too much trouble,” the headmistress’s voice said, growing fainter. “Always breaking the rules. So many unpaid fines. What is his uncle thinking? Next year’s enrollment will be conditional on the payment of all outstanding fees and tuition, *plus* next year’s tuition up front.”

Hot tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, threatening to roll down my cheek. I shook my head angrily. Stupid school.

Antigrav brakes squealed down the street. I lifted my head and wiped away the tears.

Stupid expensive school, with its tiny ledges and short independent study period. A timer went off on my wrist comm. Twenty minutes to get registered for this week’s tournament. A fierce grin crept across my face. One last time. I would play HKO one last time, win, and cash out my ranking for a hovercan full of birr. When I returned this

afternoon, just before the final period, it would be to dump a pile of money on the headmistress's desk. Uncle Moti would never have to stoop to begging for anything again.

The hovercan rumbled closer. The floating garbage truck was driverless, its route preprogrammed. Every day, just after noon, it floated beneath the school and collected the lunchtime trash that those awful cleaning bots discarded via the chute. Today, it was my ride out of here.

I steadied myself.

Stupid school.

Stupid power outages.

Stupid rules.

They were all useless. Uncle Moti always said rules were guides to a prosperous future, but I had a different saying: What's a rule if not an invitation to break it? I just had to find a way to get around it. That's just what I was going to do. I had a date with the game of the century, and I wasn't going to miss it for anything. I'd get that money. I'd be famous. They wouldn't be able to talk about me like that again. Or Uncle Moti. They'd beg me to stay and keep spending our money there. They'd print my face on their electronic brochure.

The hovercan flew right under me. I tensed as the cleaning bots started beeping again, a warning no one else heard. My heart thudded in my chest. My eyes grew wide.

“Time to go!”

“Mrowr!”

“Sorry, Besa, we have to jump . . . now!”

I hurled myself through the air, loving the feel of the wind through my curls, freedom filling my soul, as if this was the only thing I was meant to do.

Soar, Yared. Soar.