

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KWAME MBALIA
PRINCE JOEL MAKONNEN

LAST GATE
OF THE EMPEROR



THE ROYAL TRIALS



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**SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK**

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-66595-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, May 2022

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi

TO THE CHILDREN STILL SEARCHING FOR THEIR PLACE IN THE STORY.

**LAST GATE
OF
THE EMPEROR
THE ROYAL TRIALS**

Automated voice: Checking approved holofeeds for today, 2150.227.

Automated voice: No feeds approved. Prisoner restricted at quantum levels.

Automated voice: Unauthorized access detected.

Automated voice: Processing . . . processing . . . proc

Automated voice: Access granted. Welcome, USER_ID_NOT_FOUND.

Automated voice: Three feeds approved. Playing first holofeed.

INA Newsbot: Intergalactic News Association. News from the stars you can trust. Now this.

INA Newsbot: Excitement! Speculation! And more than a little curiosity, as an empire returns. Axum, long thought destroyed, has reemerged. But is the former benevolent superpower what it once was? Even now, as the iconic traveling space station enters the edges of the Sol-Luna System, people are divided.

INA Newsbot: Some welcome the return of the creators of much of the technology we currently

use, including this newsbot. Others can't help but point out their convenient timing, just as the Inter-galactic Union is set to vote on who will be awarded all the scientific research left behind when Axum disappeared. And just where were they? Why do preliminary scans show battle damage on the space station? And, as several IU ambassadors have mentioned privately, what do they want? These questions and more will have to be answered, and soon.

INA Newsbot: And now this: Another inner-system attack by the group calling themselves the Shrikes. IU authority says—

Automated voice: End of first holofeed.

Automated voice: Playing second holofeed.

nanoLogic: Welcoooooooooome to a special episode of *epiCast*! Coming to you live from the Jupiter Colony Academy! Thank you to our partners at LunaCola—because of them, we're now streaming throughout Sol System.

nanoLogic: The Royal Trials are almost here. Are you ready? We'll have highlights and commentary from games across the tournament. I'm your host,

L0giiiiic, and it's time for my favorite segment and yours, "Stream Hopping"! So plug in, get your questions ready, and hold on to your digitized butts, because YOU might get to hop in stream with me. Ready? Let's gooooo!

nanoL0gic: Hey, what's up, you're holo'ed in the *epiCast* stream. What's your name, and what're you most excited about?

Bank\$hot: Hey, I'm on! I'm on! MOM! Holy . . . okay, hey, L0gic! My name is Bank\$hot, I'm eleven, and I'm super excited about the Royal Trials, especially the Trios.

nanoL0gic: Hey, Bank\$hot, welcome to the stream! And Trios! Definitely ready to see our faves compete. If for some chaffing reason you don't know what Trios is, jack up the volume on the stream and pay attention. Trios is the new battle royale format—not one, not two, but three players team up in squad-based action to take on other teams, all competing to reach the final level. But the fun doesn't end there! Once at the final level, it's every player for themselves! Ultimate betrayals and backstabbing! If you thought the rivalries were heated in Duos, look out! Thanks, Bank\$hot!

nanoL0gic: Hey, what's up? You're holo'ed in the *epiCast* stream. What's your name, and what're you most excited about?

ImanI: Heeeey, L0gic. My name is ImanI, and I'm ready to meet the new prince! Do you think he'll make an appearance? Ooh, do you think he'll play in the Royal Trials?

nanoL0gic: Hey, ImanI, nice holofit! And the prince! What a story, right? Royalty at the battle royale. The headlines stream themselves! Prince Yared the First, better known as Yared the Gr8, is one of the top gamers across the leaderboards, especially the HKO. I sure hope he enters the Trials. But who knows? No one's seen or heard from him since Axum entered the system. Will one of the galaxy's top gamers miss out on the tournament of a lifetime? Where is Prince Yared?

nanoL0gic: Where is Prince Yared?

nanoL0gic: Where is Prince Yared?

nanoL0gic: Where aazzse22&^2

Automated voice: Holofeed corrupted. End of holofeed.

Automated voice: Playing third holofeed.

...

...

...

The Fallen: They're here . . . It's time.

Automated voice: End of holofeed.

Log Entry, 0923 ST, Private Diary of the Royal Heir, Lij Yared Heywat

I, Yared Heywat—recently discovered prince of the Axum Empire, and not-so-recently-discovered top-ranked gamer on any leaderboard you can name—am formally using this diary entry as my personal confession.

First, I did not mean to start an intergalactic incident with an entire nation of artificial intelligences. I love sentient AIs. One of my best friends, a bionic lioness, is a sentient AI. The Coalition of Sentient Intelligence Networks has my deepest apologies, and I will do my best to support them going forward. I even bought an *I Love CoSIN* pin for my flight suit.

Second, I 100 percent believed that solar collector I destroyed was already broken. To the wonderful LiquiBulb

corporation (I'm a huge fan of your juice bulbs, by the way—super refreshing and tasty, ten out of ten, would buy for my friends), I am super-duper sorry. Hopefully power will be restored to your facility soon and we all will get to enjoy . . . your spinach-and-salmon-soufflé juice bulbs once again. Mmm. I can taste the energy already. Lovely.

Finally, to the person whom I will actually be sending this diary entry but can't actually name because some bionic lionesses like to read my outgoing comms for "protection," I'm sorry. I really am. But, if I had to do it all again, every single action taken up to this point, you know what? I would.

Even the part where I nearly died.

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—”

“Besa, yep, those are the friends. They’ll be here any minute now. Practice, you know?”

“—they’re not coming.”

“The Royal Trials are coming up soon, and Trios will be the toughest competition . . . Wait, what?” I glared at Doombot. “What do you mean, they’re not coming? We’ve got practice! And I was up until morning programming this desert environment.”

The helper bot spun on its axis again. “The human ‘friends,’ as you like to call them, have an assembly they’re attending. Your lioness is being refit for close-quarters protection. Which leaves you, Your Highness. And as your schedule clearly says, this time was reserved for speech rehearsal.”

I stared at it in confusion.

“For the upcoming Intergalactic Union reception?” Doombot said helpfully.

Still nothing.

“You have to give a speech about Axum’s mission to find the missing modules.”

My eyes widened. “Ooohhh, that! I thought that was, like, you know, optional.”

“I’m afraid not, my prince. You will be required to stand in front of thousands of ambassadors, millions more

watching via holofeed, and deliver a perfect speech that will surely be replayed around the galaxy far into the future. History will be made when you address the IU. Now, then, let's just go over . . . Wait, what are you doing? My prince?"

Look, I'm not afraid to admit I panicked here. But do you blame me? They wanted me to give a speech! To people! You send a princely message to the Nexus *one* time—in order to stop a rampaging Bulgu—and all of a sudden they make a figurehead out of you. Well, not this kid.

I unclipped the harness on my nefasi. "I don't do speeches. Nope. No, sirree, bot. I'm out. If anyone needs me, I'll be under my bed."

"But, my prince!"

"Later, Doombot," I called as the last snap unbuckled . . .
. . . and I began to fall six stories to the sim floor below.

The air whistled past my ears as I plummeted. Somewhere above me, I heard alarms blaring and Doombot shouting for help, but it all faded into the background as I squinted and let out a giant whoop.

"This is amaaaaaaaaaaaaazing!" I shouted.

Everything merged together into a gray blur. The only thing that mattered was this moment. Me and the wind—artificial or not—between my fingertips as I spread my arms

wide. I hadn't been able to get away from my newfound princely responsibilities for a while. Everyone wanted me to do something. Study the history of Axum. My family's history. Aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents: this branch of the family tree or that one. Or maybe they, like Doombot, wanted me to do what princes were supposed to do. Make speeches, attend dinners, pose for holosims that would be broadcast throughout the galaxy.

And that's cool and all.

But . . .

What about me? Did being a prince mean I had to stop being Yared?

The grin faded as I scowled, my eyes still closed. No. Not today. Today, Yared was doing something I always wanted to do . . . fly.

I opened my eyes and flicked my wrist. A beam of light shot out from the sleeve of my flight suit, and I caught it in my left hand. Glanced down.

The sim floor grew closer and closer, much quicker than I'd expected.

I stretched the light out with the gleaming silver-etched black gloves on both my hands. The beam flattened into a wide, winged triangular shape that glowed brighter than a thousand stars.

The floor was only a dozen meters away.

I pushed the winged light toward my boots and kicked my heels into place, smirking when the energy board turned silver-blue. Birhani activation complete.

The floor was close enough for me to see my reflection, less than a meter before Axum's newest prince turned into Yared injera, when I twisted my legs sharply. The birhani pivoted, skated along the training room's wall, and let out a high whine as I grabbed the front lip of the energy board and shot forward, centimeters above the ground. I sped out of the room and into a curved hallway.

What? You thought I was in danger? Please.

I raced down the empty corridor, laughing and shouting. Sometimes I'd ride up one curved wall and loop around to the other side, dodging parked people movers and leaping over the occasional cleaner bot. The training sim room was located in one of the sections of Axum where no one had been for years, which was good and bad. It was good because it meant I could do whatever I wanted without someone telling me I was doing it wrong or wasn't doing it princely enough.

The bad? Well . . .

I swerved gently to avoid a stuffed undertaker bird lying in the middle of the corridor. Frowned, then began to slow.

Some child had probably dropped it and cried about missing it for weeks on end. Every now and then, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't escape the knowledge that the Werari and their monster, the Bulgu, had done this. They forced the people of Axum to flee! To scatter across the galaxy! My heart broke all over again.

But that was the whole point of the journey we were on right now. Axum—the Emperor and Empress, their Meshenitai, Guardians, and other staff—was on its way to reunite the fractured pieces into a whole. Somewhere out there among the stars, a kid like me stared up and wondered where they really belonged.

I hoped we could bring them that answer soon.

To that end, we would need the help of others. Like the Intergalactic Union, or IU for short. The governing body of the galaxy. The people I had to make a speech in front of later.

I sighed, then paused and looked around. I . . . didn't recognize a single centimeter of my surroundings.

“Not again,” I groaned. The one drawback to zooming around the abandoned sections of a giant space station: It was super easy to get lost.

A blue light flickered over my wrists as I opened my wrist comm. A map of the local area floated in the air in front

of me. Scratching my head, I tried to zoom in and rotate to find out where I was, but the maze of passageways and doors made no sense. As I zoomed out to try and get a better look, a red light blinked on my wrist comm.

Message ping. Sender, Uncle Moti.

“Great,” I said. “Just great. Just what I need, a lecture about getting lost and responsibilities and blah blah blah.” I hesitated, then dismissed the alert. It was probably best for me to figure out where I was before facing the interrogation.

The birhani cast a soft glow as I floated in the middle of a giant six-way junction. Empty streets lined with benches and hoverlamps stretched off into the distance all around me. The space station was a giant obelisk surrounded by habitation rings larger than the city of Addis Prime, where I grew up, and it was far bigger on the inside. I got lost once trying to find a shower in my bedroom. (Fun fact: The showers were giant spheres that rotated around you, like standing in a gentle whirlpool that cleaned you instead of terrifying you.)

Anyhoo, traveling on a path toward the outer ring was called moving ringward, while traveling toward the inner ring, in the direction of the central obelisk, was called moving inward. From the little info I could pull from the map, I was in a section of the space station highlighted in orange, a flashing rectangular message in the middle.

“Closed due to insufficient number of residents,” I read aloud. “Royal decree required to reopen.”

I looked around. The highlighted section of the map was right in front of me. The streets were clear. The residential living modules, bright and airy hexagons with built-in green spaces, were in pristine condition. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear a water fountain, and hidden speakers filled the air with gentle birdsong.

Basically . . . it was perfect. And yet . . .

I sent the birhani humming down the street and drifted lazily from side to side, taking in the beautiful patterns and intricate designs decorating the sides of the lot of buildings. Holo-ads for neighborhood businesses, eateries, and other attractions materialized as I floated by. Street names written in Ge'ez traced themselves in light, disappearing as I moved on. I could almost hear the people going about their day—looking for a meal, gathering with friends, laughing at something that happened earlier in the day. It was . . . really sad.

Something beeped shrilly in the distance.

I froze.

What was that noise? I leaned forward, and the lighting hummed a little faster down the street. “Hello?” I called out. “Anyone there?”

Nothing. Only the artificial birdsong. I frowned, then

sent the lightwing creeping forward even farther before coming to a stop near a plain one-story storage building. I listened for that weird noise, but there was nothing. The storage building's hatchway had lights running around it, but when I moved closer, it remained shut. Must've been locked.

The beeping sounded again. It was *definitely* coming from the storage building.

"I'm warning you, I have a"—I glanced down, then gulped—"a map, and I'm not afraid to use it."

Still no answer. I cruised forward a few more meters before frowning and slowing to a stop. Maybe I was just paranoid. Battling the Werari—had that really only been a few months ago?—had turned my nerves to glass. The slightest surprise would—

The floor beneath me fell away. A square section collapsed into a ramp that slid into darkness. I shouted as the birhani and I tumbled down, head over heels. I crashed into two poles, ribs first, and grunted in pain. That was going to leave a mark.

"Jeez," I groaned, clutching my side. "I'm suing. Someone. Everyone. Who leaves a trapdoor there? That's just . . ."

My voice trailed off as the birhani—which had gone dark—flickered back to life. The light from the lightboard

filled the room I'd just fallen into. I hadn't crashed into poles. They were legs. Armored legs. I stood slowly, the birhani rising with me.

Dented armor legs.

An armored chestplate that looked to be scorched and beat up beyond repair.

Midnight-black helmet with tinted faceshield.

"An exo," I whispered. "Old, but . . ."

A light blinked on in the upper-right corner of the faceshield . . . and the helmet moved.

I screamed and ran. I've never climbed anything as fast as I climbed that ramp. When I reached the top, I threw the birhani beneath my boots and cranked up the speed as far as it could go, only for it to flicker off again. It crashed to the street and sent me skidding across the ground once more.

Boots dropped into view as I rolled over. When I looked up, a group of silver-and-black Meshenitai exos, loaded down with a small armory, dropped to the ground in bright trails of fire. Five, ten, fifteen of them landed around me, circling in a ring of bristling metal and burning thrusters. Black faceshields masked them, and as one they unsheathed curved swords bigger than me, their blades rippling with black fire.

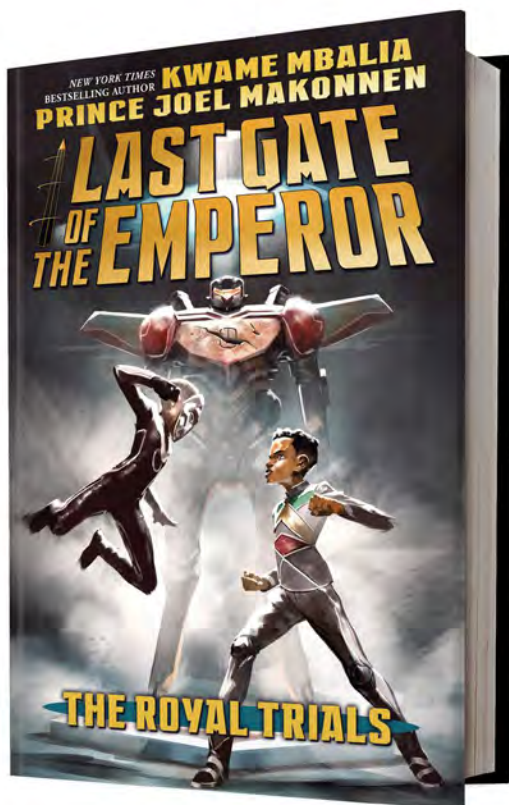
A bead of sweat rolled down my face. The birhani fizzled and disappeared.


“Um . . . hi?” I said.

One of the exos stepped forward, and the faceshield slid up.

“You are in huge trouble,” said the Ibis.

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