

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.”