

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!"

"Mrow."

"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.

"Mrow."

"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 birra. 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.