

THREE DAYS. 100 CONTESTANTS.
A RACE TO SURVIVE.

THE SURVIVAL TRIALS

HM WAUGH

THE SURFACE TRIALS

HM WAUGH


ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

*For Copper: for the inspiration, the jump scares,
and the conveniently enforced café sessions*



TRAINING THE
UNIVERSE'S
BEST PLANETICIANS
SINCE 2605.

Attention: Amethyst Antares

Congratulations! You have been successful in gaining entry to the final stage of the selection process for Starquest Academy – the Surface Trials! Your score in the Gifted and Talented (GAT) assessment was 297.8, placing you among the top ten applicants.

Transport to the Surface Trials will depart on the sixth day of Standard Month Four at 13:15 Trappist, from Trappist 1 Starport. All relevant details are attached. Please respond by return comm to confirm your attendance at the Trials.

We have attached our endorsement for you, as a Controlled citizen of Proxima Centauri, to leave your planet for the Trials. Please ensure you gain the necessary departure approvals and make yourself aware of the penalties for non-conformance with the Control of Dangerous Mental Abilities Decree 2601.

Kindest regards

Frè Xenatora

Surface Trials Coordinator

COURAGE | TEAMWORK | INNOVATION | EXPLORATION

1

THE PROXY

Amethyst Antares had no idea where in the worlds she was. Of course, this wasn't at all surprising. In fact, it was the whole point of the thing.

Six minutes and thirteen seconds to go.

She ignored the sleek ladder built into the wall of the cabin she shared with three other contestants, and pushed her legs off the edge of her capsule bed, letting the ship's gravity claim her. As expected, her flash new adaptiboots cushioned the impact as her feet hit the floor. The adrenaline rush dulled her growing panic. She caught sight of herself in the mirror. Strong. Capable. Not terrified in the slightest.

Good.

She'd watched the Surface Trials play out on her homescreen for years. Planned how to get into them for almost as long.

Looking the part was key.

'Ready, Ammy?'

She turned to see Navis grinning at her, his blue eyes bright in the shiplight, dark green uniform – identical to hers – almost shocking against the featureless pale walls. Nervous energy leaked out of him like a milkshake in zero-g.

He'd had to speak up to be heard over the holo, which Leona was watching while systematically chewing off fingernail after fingernail. Baran was sitting next to her, pretending Ammy didn't exist with an intensity that deserved some sort of award.

Nothing had changed there. Nothing was ever going to change there. And Ammy was fine with pretending he didn't exist right back at him, thank you very much.

'Totally ready,' she said to Nav, lying like a pro. 'You?'

Nav gave a cocky thumbs up, though his arm shook. 'And I'm loving this adaptigear uniform. This sort of lux will be our future, hey?'

He was from a poor planet too. Sure, no planet was ever as poor – or as reviled – as Ammy's. But still ... he was probably closest to understanding what these Trials meant to her. Get through the next three days and all this Starquest tech would be normal.

The holo was showing a program Ammy knew well – *Surface Trials: The Buildup* – where they went through all the best-ranked candidates and counted down to the start

of the Trials. Usually Ammy loved watching everything related to the Surface Trials. But now? When she was about to be in them? In four minutes and thirty-eight seconds?

Nope. Not helping.

‘Well, these fiftieth Surface Trials are set to be the best ever! The thing everyone’s talking about this year is, of course, the inclusion of Rian Amalthea,’ said Jupiter, Ammy’s favourite Trials host. She was looking as out-there as she usually did, this time in a metallic pink jumpsuit with sparkling planets woven into her hair. *‘We all know he’s the closest thing we have to intergalactic royalty. Created by a power union of the oldest Dynasty with the strongest! And it doesn’t hurt that he looks like this ...’*

The screen filled with the picture of a stupidly good-looking dark-haired boy, vivid blue eyes contrasting against bronze skin and unfairly black eyelashes. Megawatt smile flashing perfectly white teeth. Leona sighed longingly. Nav huffed. Ammy scowled. There was that anger she’d been missing, back just in time to kick her fear in its non-adaptable spacepants.

‘That’s right, Juve,’ said Jupiter’s co-host, Nindasu. *‘Rian Amalthea is the highest-ranked Dynasty member to undertake the Trials in years and the known universe is abuzz.’*

‘Of course, Nin, we’re told Rian will be heavily disguised to avoid assessor bias. He could, quite literally, be any of the candidates.’

‘I can’t imagine the pressure he’s feeling right now, trying to get into his own academy. If he’s eliminated, the worlds are going to explode with—’

Nav swiped the holoscreen closed with one jerk of his hand. He looked around in the sudden silence. ‘Sorry. It was making me jittery.’

Baran frowned at his fingers.

‘I wonder where he is?’ said Leona, her eyes that kind of dreamy Ammy had learned to associate with any talk about the Amalthean heir. ‘Maybe he’ll be in one of our Surface Squads.’

‘I hope not,’ muttered Ammy.

‘You don’t mean that!’ said Leona. ‘You can’t hold his Dynasties against him, he’s too gorgeous.’

‘Sure I can. Half his fortune comes from his ancestors stomping on mine.’

‘But that wasn’t *him*.’

‘Fine. I’ll change my mind if he shares some of that money with Proxima.’ Ammy leaned over and put a hand on Leona’s, to stop her chewing every single nail off. ‘Hey, you might need those in a bit.’

Leona muttered her thanks and sat on her hands.

Nav bent his head towards Ammy. ‘I’m glad you’re taking my warning seriously,’ he whispered.

Ammy nodded at him. But really ... not wanting the Amalthean heir on her squad had nothing to do with whatever conspiracy theory Nav had been trying to hint at yesterday. Rian Amalthea would be more likely to ignore Ammy than bother trying to harm her.

Nav’s legs jiggled. ‘I want him in my squad.’

Ammy stared at him. ‘But I thought ...?’

‘I hated him? I do. That’s the point. Anything could happen on the surface.’ He grinned rather wildly.

She looked away. Whatever this was, it wasn’t helping her stomach settle. ‘We won’t know even if he is in one of our squads.’

‘Nah, he’ll be obvious. Digimasks don’t disguise attitude.’

One minute and eight seconds to go.

‘It’s almost time,’ Ammy muttered.

She fought the unexpected urge to climb back into her capsule bed and hide. Absurd. Getting here, completing these Trials, getting into Starquest Academy – this was her dream. This way led to freedom and wealth and fame. None of which were possible back on Proxima Centauri.

Years of watching the Surface Trials had taught her they weren’t being filmed yet. This would be the last time for days. She closed her eyes, focused on what she had to do: make it through these Trials. She imagined stepping over the line and seeing Rian Amalthea’s pretty face all shocked because a Proxy had made it through. Even better, she imagined getting to the end and finding out Rian Amalthea had been eliminated. On day one.

There was a loud click. Startling in the otherwise silent dorm. Their door swung open. Ammy’s nerves returned.

She knew this moment. Tiny green lights had appeared on the uniform collars of her dormmates; their suitcams had started recording. And that meant all the cameras in the corridors, the landers and – of course – on the surface

would have activated as well. People in homes around the galaxies would be leaning forward in anticipation of their first live views of the candidates and the planet they'd spend the next three days on. Jupe and Nin would be commentating their brightly coloured hearts out on screens everywhere.

Ammy made herself walk forward. Her legs felt wobbly. Pace uneven. Would that be obvious to the assessors? She lengthened her stride, set her face into serious mode, and walked through to the uncertain future that open door signified.

She walked like she was ready for this. Made for this. Like she was looking forward to being drafted into a Surface Squad with total strangers and dropped in the middle of who knew what.

It was finally beginning.

She felt like throwing up.

2

THE HEIR

No pressure, but Rian Amalthea was expected to get into what was basically his own school.

There were no guarantees. Take his Great-Uncle Armus as a prime example. People still hadn't stopped talking about Armus Amalthea's so-called 'epic failure', and he'd made it through to the afternoon of day one of the Surface Trials. Then there was Rian's cousin Lexi, who hadn't even passed her GAT test. It didn't matter to the media or the Academy that she'd only just recovered from mercurial deep-space encephalitis. That was her one chance, done for.

There was no way Rian wanted to join that branch of the family Dynasty. He could imagine what the gossip zines would say, and none of it would be pretty.

The glowing corridors were blending into each other as he walked. Each wall was lush with living plants, and all the clear floors had identical carpets of vibrant moss underneath them. Every corridor on this mainship was like an artery, pumping out oxygen. The air echoed with the tread of ninety-nine other candidates. Was he almost at the lander port?

Rian felt a sudden need to run in the opposite direction, raid the kitchen and shove handfuls of scorching-hot chocorbs in his face. Ridiculous. The only way to end this was to get through it. He saw his reflection in a blacked-out window, and a stranger stared back at him. His disguise, in place since he'd boarded the ship.

Which planet were they about to land on? They were four days out of Trappist, and the wormhole had only taken an hour of that. Their ship ran on Nadahan skimtech – a drive system so powerful and so secret Rian still hadn't convinced anyone to tell him what propelled it, even though he was set to inherit the patent.

But four days' skimming? They had to be a seriously long way away from anything. And yet . . . that only cut out eleven of the thirty-four potential planets. Panic flooded him, and he fought it back, knowing they were already being watched.

Wherever they were about to land, he had to believe he had the skills to make it.

Starquest Academy's official line was that you couldn't prepare for the Surface Trials. Rian knew they were lying. He'd had a personal tutor for it for years now. He'd read

all the Trials records. Solved every old code twice before he checked the answers. Learned every survival skill there was. Hiked longer and longer distances every day. Because once he was on planet, it would be too late to get ready.

One hundred clever and driven kids had come out here. Most would be going home without an Academy place. He wouldn't let that be him.

So he made himself smile as he stepped into the launchport and followed the tug of his suit to his assigned lander.

Nobody knew it yet, but he had a name to uphold.

3

THE OUTLIER

Oh no.
All Deneb Algedi's positive attitude counted for nothing as the lander dipped and saliva rushed into his mouth. Acid seared his tongue. His insides churned.

He tried to focus on the four others with him. His Surface Squad, all clad – like him – in dark green adaptigear with the Starquest logo on the top left of the shirt. Opposite was a girl with a no-nonsense buzzcut and a hard set to her jaw, reminiscent of the crystal she was named after. She was frankly intimidating. Not exactly helping his state of mind. On her right sat—

The lander shuddered. His eyes shut without his permission. His guts clenched.

Breathe. This was just normal entry turbulence. It would be over soon.

All the other kids were probably nervous about what lay ahead. What they'd face on the surface. Deneb knew he was an outlier.

He was terrified of the trip down.

4

TALKING DURING TRANSFER TO THE SURFACE IS PROHIBITED

Of all the ways Ammy had imagined her Trials beginning, not even the worst of them involved vomit on her sleek new adaptiboots.

Thankfully, the chuck-risk was not hers. She still felt like her guts had been filled with extraction sludge, but now she was off the mainship and in the lander with her newly assigned Surface Squad, she had it under control.

She hoped.

The kid opposite her . . . did *not*. A dangerously green face hid behind messy, dark blond hair that was curling sweatily. It wasn't helping that the windows of the landing pod were still blacked out. Like, seriously? All their comchips had been deactivated back on the mainship.

What unfair advantage could any squad possibly get now, as they all headed to the surface?

The kid closed grey eyes, swallowed hard. Ammy pulled her feet in closer. Pointless. If there was going to be spew, it was going to get all five occupants of this lander, no matter what. It wasn't what you'd call spacious in here, and g-forces did weird things to airborne liquids.

Also, Ammy was a sympathetic vomiter.

The descent was usually a loaded moment for those watching at home. Ammy used to be so excited, studying all the silent faces as their landers plummeted to the unknown. Where would they end up? Would they get on with their new squadmates? Who would talk first once they landed?

It wasn't quite the same vibe in real life.

Keep acting calm, she told herself. The known universe was watching her now. Worse, the *assessors* were watching.

She studied her competition. No, get it right – her *squadmates*. On spew-kid's left was a kid with bright blond hair cropped short, somehow managing to look both super pretty and uber tough at the same time. Ammy's eyes flashed down to the badge on their uniform. He was a boy called Tayga. He looked like he was ready for anything. His Starquest uniform was the same as what everyone else had been given to wear, but on him it was like designer gear from Gliese. He met Ammy's gaze and smiled, his pinky-purple eyes sparkling like crystals. So . . . he'd probably been born on one of Teegarden's planets. Or his parents had. No one else ended up with eyes like that.

Go figure. A planet mutation people actually liked.

Ammy made herself smile back.

She'd got this far. Overcome obstacles no one else even had to think about: approval to leave her planet, and a special round of Mindbreaker Testing to make extra sure she hadn't developed any of the outlawed mind powers Proxima was maligned for. And she'd ended up with top ten GAT test marks. She was tougher. Stronger. Smarter. She'd fought to get here. She was going to keep fighting.

Getting into Starquest Academy had little to do with looks, even if the looks were as good as Teegarden Tayga's. Sure, he'd get backers easily. But that wasn't the real battle. You had to convince the assessors. Ammy would worry about whether she had enough backers once she'd passed.

She dragged her attention to the person sitting between herself and Tayga. They were staring at their boots, seeming completely unruffled. Ammy took a deep breath.

Hopefully, from the outside, she looked just as calm.

She checked their badge. A girl called Ursus. Ammy recognised her from the trip out. Her hair was short, brown and shaggy. She held her arms in close, like she was concerned she was going to crowd out her neighbours. Everything about her was on a scale about half again as big as anyone else. Maybe from a low-grav planet? Back on the mainship, Ammy had thought the girl looked like fun, always with a joke. Now? In the confines of the tiny lander? Yeah.

Tough competition.

Ammy pulled her attention to the kid sitting on her other side. She couldn't see their badge. Their black hair was plaited neatly, pulled over one shoulder. Suddenly Ammy was second-guessing her long-held belief that short hair would be an advantage in the Surface Trials. She pushed a hand through the soft bristle of her own cut, and hoped the hidden surveillance couldn't pick up how much she was shaking.

When would they reach the surface already?

She tapped her wrist to see the time, then remembered her comchip was deactivated. Controlled a wince. She imagined people sitting safely at home, laughing at her, and fury fought with embarrassment in her guts.

The lander hit more turbulence and spew-kid groaned. At least they were someone she was doing better than. Travel sickness and interstellar planetary exploration did not go together.

Ammy sighed. She'd promised herself she wouldn't get like this.

Competitive.

Mean.

It was just the stress of the unknown. This lander. The impending spewnam. Starquest admission was her one and only chance to escape Proxima. It was what she and Citrine had always dreamed of. And now her best friend had vanished and Ammy wasn't waiting around for the same to happen to herself. She set her jaw. She was going to beat Rian Amalthea at his own game. Going to beat them all.

That was the general idea.

Twenty squads of five begin. Twenty candidates get through.

Sure, some years a squad just gels and three or four of them might make it, and the gossip zines are filled with nothing but details about *the latest Quasar Squad* for weeks afterwards. But the easiest way to win is to outlast the rest of your team.

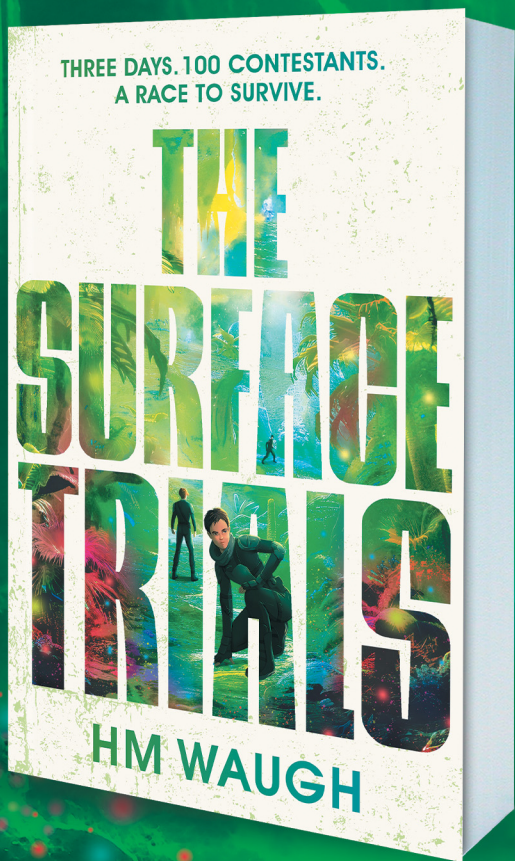
G-forces suddenly pushed her into her seat. Vanished just as fast. The engine went silent. Ammy's pulse rocketed. Her head spun.

The *No talking* sign clicked off and the door swished open.

They were here. They'd arrived. It was happening.

The Surface Trials had truly begun.

**WELCOME TO
THE SURFACE TRIALS.
THE ONLY WAY INTO
STARQUEST ACADEMY.**



OUT NOW