

REBORN AS A
**SPACE
MERCENARY**

I WOKE UP PILOTING THE
STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY
Ryuto

ILLUSTRATED BY
**Tetsuhiro
Nabeshima**







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Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.10

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Prologue

I AWOKE TO THE SOUND of the bedroom door opening and closing. Technically, the air pressure difference between my room and the hallway caused that noise, but I basically considered it the sound of the door.

Someone's probably here to wake me up, I thought dreamily.

A powerful flash of light beyond my eyelids broke my trance-like slumber. No, “powerful” isn’t the right word—it was bright enough to burn through my eyelids straight to my retinas.

“Gah! Too bright! What’s your problem?!” As I jumped up, the dazzling light made my already-bleary vision even blearier. “Argh...my eyes...”

My burning eyes made out the shape of someone staggering. I whipped out an arm and pulled the intruder onto the bed before she fell over.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Y-yes, I think so.”

As my vision cleared, I gradually discerned the features of the girl I’d pulled onto the bed. Long, glossy, rich brown hair; long, pointed ears poking out of that hair; hazel eyes tinged slightly pink as tears welled up.

It was Tinia. She was, uh...basically an elven princess. Yeah, that description pretty much covers it. The exact pretty elf you’d picture if you read about one in a novel.

“Th-thank...you?!” Tinia sat bolt upright on the bed, staring at me. In no time, her flawless face turned beet red; she appeared boiling hot from her neck to the tips of her ears.

Yeah, I sleep in my briefs. In other words, my upper half was naked. The light had only just forced me awake, so my well-toned upper body was fully exposed. My crew wouldn’t think anything of seeing me half-naked, but a literal princess had the opposite reaction. The sight of a half-naked man was a little too much for Tinia.

“P-pardon me!”

She rushed out of my room in a panic, leaving behind the seed of the sacred tree—the cause of all my trouble—in the process. It shone brightly in protest.

“This is all your fault.” I smacked the football-sized glorified light bulb. It flashed again in protest. *Man, that thing is bright. I ought to wrap it in a sheet and throw it in storage.* I sighed. “Well, might as well just get up.”

Since Tinia had abandoned the seed in my care, I wrapped it in a sheet and got ready, recalling my plans for the day. The seed continued to shine stubbornly, but I full-on ignored that top-tier nuisance.

Let’s recap my misadventures. I was warmly welcomed to the planet Leafil IV, known to locals as Theta. I nearly died crash-landing in a forest, camped alongside the elf princess Tinia, and watched Mei fight off a full-bore pirate drop raid in the *Black Lotus*. After that excitement, my crew and I headed back into space, traveling to the colony Leafil Prime. Finally, after a good night’s sleep, I was dazzled by that top-tier nuisance. I liked having a stimulating daily life, but there were limits, you know?

When I tried to leave the damn seed in my room, it started vibrating and making weird noises, so I gave up and toted it along to the dining hall.

For some reason, everyone’s eyes focused on me as soon as I entered. “Morning, girls.”

What’s going on? I don’t kn... Well, okay, I know what I did wrong. Everyone looks like they’re trying to comfort Tinia. And when she looked at me just now, she blushed and started panicking again.

“I think we really got our wires crossed here, but listen—it’s all this thing’s fault.” I raised the seed in both hands. It brightened as if denying my accusation. *Can’t take the heat, huh? I ought to boil, mash, and stew you.*

“Nobody’s blaming you, Hiro. But Tinia’s led a sheltered life. Try to be considerate,” Elma said with an annoyed glare. Her long ears marked her as an elf, like Tinia. She was also a veteran mercenary who definitely had more action under her belt than anyone else on the crew. Her silky silver hair stopped at her

shoulders, long ears poking out from either side; like most elves, Elma was jaw-droppingly beautiful. But she wasn't stereotypically "elven" on days off; she lounged around the ship in casual clothes, getting drunk off cheap liquor. Personally, I found that side of her cute too.

"How was I supposed to be 'considerate'? You know how I sleep."

Mimi chuckled. "Wish I'd been there." Grinning, she put her hand on Tinia's back to comfort her. Mimi had been the first to join my crew, and these days she was a top-class operator.

She was a short stack, if you know what I mean. If you don't, that's fine. But damn. At any rate, she was a plain old human like me, and was as young as she looked. Still, she was an adult—don't worry. (And don't ask why that matters.) We'd recently discovered that Mimi came from an Imperial bloodline, but we'd managed to keep her in our crew as the same old Mimi we knew and loved.

Two young women—though they might have *looked* like teenage girls—then greeted me.

"Mornin', hon!"

"Yes, good morning...er, hon."

"Hey. Morning, you two."

The girls had intense red and blue hair, respectively. The redhead was Tina, while the blue-haired girl was Wiska. They were twins, and basically identical. Although they were adults the same age as me, they looked like teenagers; if you're wondering why, it was just a racial trait. That was how female dwarves looked. In some stories they grew beards like male dwarves or resembled old ladies with button noses. In this world, however, they looked like young girls.

Incidentally, despite *looking* young, they were incredibly strong. I couldn't have held my own against them at all in a simple contest of raw strength.

As I sat down and tossed the sacred tree seed onto the table, Mei appeared, bringing me breakfast right on time.

"Good morning, Master."

"Morning, Mei."

Mei was a Maidroid—android maid—I had purchased, a machine intelligence with a positronic brain. What was “machine intelligence”? I’ll skip that question, because it’d take forever to explain. Basically, Mei was a robot who thought and felt like a human. I’d designed her top to bottom, from her appearance to her technological features. All her parts were high spec; she was my ideal Maidroid.

Mei wasn’t just a perfect maid who could complete all the household chores a maid should look after. She was an exceptional servant who could pilot a ship, fight in hand-to-hand combat, serve as a bodyguard, teach skills, and even wage digital warfare.

I hadn’t seen her when I entered the dining hall, but trying to figure out when she’d shown up would’ve been pointless. Popping out of nowhere was just something she did.

“Mmm,” I said as I dug in. “Delicious as ever.”

Today’s breakfast was a salmon meal of some kind. Since it came from an automatic cooker, the color was a little off, but the smells and tastes were just like those of salted salmon, white rice, and miso soup. I’d really gotten used to the automatic cooker’s synthetic foods.

“Sorry to bother you while you enjoy breakfast,” said Elma, “but do you know our plans for the day?”

“Don’t remind me. Thinking about them ruins the flavor of the food.”

“You look real morose about ’em, hon,” Tina frowned.

Wiska cocked her head. “Does meeting the Lieutenant Colonel bother you that much?”

Imperial Lieutenant Colonel Serena Holz was a cool, blonde, red-eyed beauty who looked great in a white Imperial officer’s uniform. Though still young, she’d risen through the ranks quickly, an up-and-coming elite soldier. These days, she led a fleet called the Pirate-Hunting Unit.

“Yeah, of course it does.” I heaved a sigh. “I already know what she wants.”

We’d only been in the elven mother system a few days, but the elves had been under attack from a pirate gang since before our arrival. They *were* just

space pirates; still, some large-scale pirate fleets were too much for local star system police to handle. Unfortunately, such a pirate gang—Red Flag, an especially large band—was attacking the Leafil System. They’d moved against its mother planet Leafil IV, plundering as they went and kidnapping a number of elves.

The star system fleet hadn’t just sat on their laurels. They’d pursued the attackers fiercely, shooting most of them down. We’d happened to catch the remaining large pirate ship on our radar, so we captured and boarded it. After that, Red Flag attempted another attack on Leafil IV, but the star system fleet and *Black Lotus*—piloted by Mei—drove them off.

The system’s fleet wasn’t incompetent. As soon as they realized that a pirate band beyond their abilities had set its sights on Leafil, they’d naturally sent the Imperial Fleet an aid request.

What Imperial force would be chosen to handle that request? Well, I think Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit was the obvious choice; maybe I was an idiot for not having realized that earlier.

Serena herself was the type who utilized every resource. If convenient forces like me and my crew were available at the site she was dispatched to, she’d enlist us. I didn’t blame her. I’d do so in her shoes, after all.

That said, while I didn’t have anything against her, she had no qualms about demanding the impossible; she was sure to do so again this time. I hated that I had the skills and talent to accept such demands.

“I’m amazed that we run into her so often in the vastness of outer space,” Elma mused.

“Well, we like to work within the Empire’s territory, and our jobs usually involve pirates.” Mimi shrugged. “It makes sense that we bump into each other quite a bit.”

“Maybe. We didn’t even come to hunt pirates this time, though!”

One might get suspicious when a huge pirate gang *happened to* attack a star system I’d visited to sightsee, followed by Lieutenant Colonel Serena *happening to* arrive to deal with them. But perhaps that was due to my being a magnet for

trouble.

“Even if it ain’t surprisin’,” Tina laughed, “it sure is crazy how you two attract each other.”

“You said you’ve crossed paths constantly since you met in the Tarmein System, right?” Wiska added.

“Yeah.” In retrospect, Serena was the person in this universe I had the most history with, not counting Mimi and Elma. Not that I was willing to be her subordinate or whatever because of that.

“It’s almost like you’re fated to be together,” Wiska said.

I shuddered. “Don’t joke about that, please. You’re scaring me.” I didn’t want destiny pairing Serena and me up in any way; that was terrifying. But now that I was a platinum-ranker with a Gold Star, and I’d won the Emperor’s tournament to boot, it wouldn’t be surprising if Serena really set her sights on me going forward.

“Why do ya hate her that much? She’s real pretty.”

“Can’t argue there. She’s pretty, all right. And I appreciate how she lets her guard down in private or when she’s drunk. But she’s a marquis’s daughter. And, unlike Elma, she has close ties to her family. I don’t like how dangerous it is to be close to her. And mainly...” I glanced around the faces in the room. “I like the mercenary life and the freedom it comes with. I’ll pass on being a military man bound by rules and bureaucracy.”

Chapter 1:

Those Who Hunt Space Pirates

“**W**E MEET AGAIN. There seemed to be a connection between us that simply can’t be cut, doesn’t there?”

I laughed awkwardly. “Please, that’s too kind. I’m just your average mercenary.”

In the reception chamber of the *Lestarius*, the flagship of the Imperial Fleet’s Pirate-Hunting Unit, Serena and I were exchanging words and token laughter. *Damn. I want to go home.*

Mei and I had boarded the *Lestarius* alone. Our crewmates remained on the *Black Lotus* to look after maintenance, procure supplies, and gather intelligence.

“I find it hard to believe a platinum-rank Gold Star recipient could be called average,” Serena countered.

Sure, that’s fair. I had risen to the highest mercenary rank and received the Gold Star—the colloquial name for the First-Magnitude Star’s Cross of Brilliance—for my exploits in the battle against the crystal life-forms. Those honors hadn’t had any real benefits, though. Hell, maybe it was just me, but they seemed to have *drawbacks*.

“I see you’re doing outstanding work here as well,” Serena continued. “But is it just me, or does trouble await everywhere you go?”

“I think you’re imagining things. Let’s leave it at that. Otherwise, it’ll get me down.”

“Oh. Very well,” Serena accommodated my request, flinching at my suddenly serious tone.

“For the record, when my ship got to this system, the first raid was already over. We just happened to snag some runaway pirates who slipped past local authorities.” In essence, I was insisting that I hadn’t *brought* the trouble here.

"In other words, you don't attract trouble. Trouble attracts *you*."

"Come on, get off my back. I don't want to hear another word about that." I hated her knack for making me face the music.

"Well, I think we've celebrated our reunion long enough," Serena smiled. "What do you say we get down to business?"

When exactly did we "celebrate"? All she did was bat me around.

"Naturally, you understand why I summoned you today, don't you, Captain Hiro?"

"Nope."

"Stop feigning ignorance. This is serious."

Crap. No more playing dumb, huh? "Aye aye. This is about Red Flag, right? Since you traveled here, I assume you know about the first drop raid."

"Of course. After all, planetary drop raids are an affront to the Empire's dignity. We mustn't allow them."

That reminded me. Back when the resort planet we were staying on was attacked, Lieutenant Colonel Serena—Lieutenant Commander at the time—came running right away. After all, her unit went around putting out fires caused by pirates.

"I see," I replied. "By the way, I see your unit's getting...a little big."

"I *was* promoted, after all. Higher authority has enabled me to procure more ships and personnel."

"Good for you."

We'd flown the *Black Lotus* to Leafil Prime for my meeting with Serena. Along the way, I'd noticed an awful lot of ships docked at the colony. The *Lestarius* was the only battleship, but I'd spotted cruisers and destroyers as well. The number of corvettes at the Pirate-Hunting Unit's disposal had also skyrocketed. I'd advised Serena to specialize in asteroid-belt combat a while back, and she was seemingly doing so.

Ships of destroyer class and larger struggled in asteroid-belt dogfights, but a

well-piloted corvette could navigate those areas. In fact, pirates struggled most against regular military corvettes. The corvettes' shields were far too thick for pirates to break, and their firepower easily overcame pirate ships' shields and plating. Corvettes were fast too; escaping them was tricky, and if pirates tried to leave an asteroid belt hastily, the greater fleet's daunting firepower would obliterate them.

"With a force that size, I bet you don't need help to take down a pirate base," I joked.

"Indeed not. In fact, we've already crushed a few smaller bases. This time, however, we're taking down a large gang. Enlisting external aid—mercenaries, that is—won't hurt. It's a wonderful stroke of luck that you and your crew are in the vicinity. Or shall we call it fate?"

"All right," I mumbled.

"You *will* join the assault, won't you?" Serena flashed me a dishonestly cloying smile.

Well, yeah. I guess I will. "Let's talk money first. A platinum-ranker with a Gold Star isn't cheap." My thumb rubbed against my fingers in the gesture for "pay up."

"You don't offer discounts to friends?"

"Nope." *I won't miss out on my full pay, I swear. Your puppy eyes won't work on me.* "Why do you care? It's not coming out of your pocket." *Why lower yourself to bringing up a discount?* I wondered, but kept myself from asking. Serena's sword was within easy reach; if I said something dumb, I could literally lose my head.

"Captain Hiro, the military's budget is not infinite," Serena confessed with a sincere look. "Especially when it comes to my unit."

"I get it. The thing is, if I sell my skills cheaply, that causes trouble for everyone of my rank." I replied just as sincerely.

If I accepted a military job for a low fee, allowing the Imperial military to undercut other platinum-rankers, my peers might decide I was a problem. Like any branch of government, the military probably worked on precedent; I didn't

want to set a bad one. “Anyway, your orders come from above, right? Shouldn’t your superiors foot the bill?”

I assumed that, after the first drop raid, the Imperial military dispatched Serena’s unit to deal with the urgent rescue request from the Leafil System’s fleet. Though the local elves governed the system themselves, they were under the Empire’s protection. Letting pirates prey on Imperial citizens would undermine the Empire, so Serena had been sent—and would also have received a corresponding level of authority.

“When we first met, you were so naï—er, honest,” Serena corrected herself. “When did you become so jaded?”

“Were you about to call me ‘naïve’?”

“Not at all.”

Don’t look all nonchalant. You were totally saying it. I didn’t mishear.

Back in the Tarmein System, I’d foolishly let Serena enlist me in the battle against the Belbellum Federation. I’d danced to that pretty lady’s tune until she convinced me to say I could help out. I wasn’t about to fall for that again.

“I’m not saying I won’t pitch in. I just need you to offer reasonable compensation.”

“Is that so? Then I presume this will do.” Serena’s offer wasn’t quite as much as Count Dalenwald’s 300,000 Ener per day, but it was market value: 200,000 Ener per day, as well as the usual bounties and rewards per ship defeated. Not bad overall.

“I’d like to request a little bonus. Not more money.”

“Let’s hear it, then,” Serena urged.

“I want to update the *Black Lotus*’s weaponry. Get me access to military-grade weapons. I’ll pay for them, of course.”

“Oh, I see. That gunboat of yours... You call it a mothership, I believe? Upgrading its firepower would certainly help me as well.”

It is a mothership, I thought defensively. *A mothership with lots of firepower.* “Things have been kind of hectic, but we discussed this before. I could go for

lightweight power armor, too.”

“Understood. I’ll fulfill my duties this time, including meeting these new conditions. Certainly, I’ll proceed with arranging military-grade weapon procurement for your ship. I’m certain my superiors won’t refuse a request to outfit a Gold Star recipient.”

“Thanks. Mind contacting me with the schedule for that when it’s confirmed?”

“Gladly. You’ll hear from me as soon as we choose a course of action. I don’t expect it to take long, so please stand by and be ready to depart.”

“Roger that.”

We were up against Red Flag, a gang that had evaded the Imperial Fleet for years. I doubted we’d wipe them out easily. Did Serena have a secret plan in the works?

Back on board the *Black Lotus*, I announced our participation to the crew. “So...it looks like we’ll be hunting Red Flag too.”

No one looked surprised.

“You seemed all reluctant before, but there ya go agreein’ to it,” Tina sighed.

“It’s risky, but we could make out like bandits,” I insisted. “Serena’s help will smooth out military-grade weapon procurement, and if we make enough money during the mission, the upgrades will basically be free. We’ll get a daily stipend and kill rewards on top of bounties. Seems like a no-brainer to me.”

“But you *were* reluctant, weren’t you?” Wiska asked.

“Well...things tend to get out of hand when Serena’s involved.”

The first instance of that had been a pirate base attack. From there, we’d somehow ended up in a territorial dispute with a neighboring nation. That had led to Serena’s promotion and commission to lead the Pirate-Hunting Unit. We hadn’t run into her for a while after that, but then she dragged us into a huge battle against the crystal life-forms. It led to my receiving a big award, visiting the Imperial capital, getting into a whole mess with the Imperial family... It

really seemed like Serena was the main factor that wrapped me up in a lot of funny business.

“Do you think helping will be a mistake...?” I ventured. “Nah. If we left Serena in the lurch, it’d just lead to more trouble.”

“Yeah,” Elma agreed. “By the time she caught you, it’d be too late.”

“Maybe we should’ve anticipated this and fled ahead of time,” Mimi mused.

“Predicting things that far in advance would be a tall order...” I replied. In short, this was fate. Preestablished harmony, as they say. I didn’t believe in predestination, but since I’d come to this universe, things sure had felt “destined.” Was I just paranoid? “Anyway, there you have it. Get ready to launch, everyone.”

“Aye aye, Captain!”

Watching the crew get to work, I gave Mei her orders. “Mei, I need you to draw up plans for the *Black Lotus*’s upgrades. Money is no object...is how I’d *like* to approach those. That’s not really how things work, though. So 20,000,000 Ener is a decent budget, right?”

“Yes, I believe that will be plenty.”

With that sum, we could probably upgrade to military-grade plating and laser cannons and have change left over.

“Oh! Master Hiro!” cried Mimi. She’d stayed in the dining hall with us, hunched over her tablet. “Are we transporting military supplies again this time?”

“Let’s pass. If we’re up against a major pirate fleet, we’ll need that space to store loot.”

“Got it!” Mimi chirped eagerly, then ran off to her work.

Now what do I look after? I wondered. Just then, the last person still with me in the dining hall—Tinia—met my eyes and tilted her head in bemusement. In her arms, the sacred tree seed shone faintly. “Er, what shall I do?”

“That’s the question of the hour.” I sat down across from her and scratched my head.

Tinia was in a delicate position. It'd take too long to explain it completely, but let me start by saying that she was a proper young lady from a rich family. More precisely, her parents headed one of her home planet's three great powers. She was basically a princess.

What did that actually mean? This might not be the nicest way to put it, but unfortunately, she was essentially expected to be a pawn in a strategic marriage connecting two families.

What qualities were required of such a person? Well, obviously, they had to be sexually untouched. I totally get that it's an outdated mentality—but what do you want me to do about it? The Grald Clan Tinia came from was staunchly conservative, and as a prominent member, she had to respect tradition and old ways of doing things.

At any rate, Tinia had been dragged into a string of incidents her clan would've considered scandalous, even for someone essentially flawless beforehand. First, she was abducted by pirates in the middle of her betrothal ceremony. That alone would deduct a hundred “points” from her reputation. Space pirates were infamous embodiments of money, violence, and sex, so you can imagine what kind of things people assumed happened to Tinia in captivity—regardless of the truth.

Tinia's woes hadn't ended there. Next, she'd crash-landed in a dangerous forest alone with a wandering mercenary—one with multiple wives to boot—and spent the night with him. Subtract another ten thousand or so points for that. People were sure to think that something had happened between me and Tinia...again, regardless of the truth.

I'll say this, just for the sake of Tinia's honor—she told me the pirates had done nothing to her. I hadn't, either. She was pure as the driven snow. But the world at large wouldn't see that. Even the Grald Clan wasn't unified; members with something to gain wouldn't hesitate to exploit her misfortunes. As a result, Tinia was in a very delicate position.

“At any rate,” I added, “it wouldn't be right for us to decide on our own. Seems to me we'll just have to sit down and chat with your dad.”

“I suppose so...” Tinia looked down sadly and hugged the sacred tree seed. It

flickered dimly, perhaps trying to soothe her. It was hard to say for sure, but that thing was surprisingly smart; maybe it really was attempting to comfort Tinia.

“I know you’re in a rough position right now. If you want to stay on our ship until things settle down, that’s fine with me. But we plan to go to war against Red Flag, which will obviously be risky. If things go off the rails, you could get turned into space dust alongside us.”

I didn’t plan to let that happen, of course. That was mercenary work, though; a moment’s inattentiveness could mean death. If we let a single torpedo touch the *Black Lotus*, we’d be gone without a trace.

“May I...?”

“We’ll do our best to take care of you, but we can’t guarantee your safety. If you’re fine with that, sure. I owe you my life. I’m not about to throw you out on your butt and leave you to fend for yourself.”

Back when our craft crash-landed on Leafil IV, I’d sustained a fatal injury. Tinia had saved my life by healing me, so I wasn’t about to ditch her before I repaid that debt. I’d follow her wishes to the best of my ability.

“For now,” I said, “let’s get in contact with your dad, okay?”

Chapter 2:

Handling Tinia

I HAD FEW ELF CONNECTIONS to rely on at Leafil Prime. As for how many could get me in touch with Zesh of the Grald Clan—Tinia’s father—that number was exactly one.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re busy, Your Excellency General Gem Dar.”

“Any request from you is welcome, Sir Hiro. Enough with the ‘Your Excellency,’ though. Please.” The handsome old dandy General Gem Dar welcomed us warmly. He ranked near the top of the Leafil System military fleet; we’d met him after capturing our first pirate ship in this system.

“Thank you for your help of late, General,” Tinia greeted Gem Dar.

“Ah, yes... Of course. It’s a pleasure to see you in good health, Lady Tinia. That said, I think I understand your position quite well.”

General Gem Dar seemed a little awkward around Tinia. I recalled that most of the Leafil fleet’s higher-ups hailed from the progressive Rosé Clan and didn’t get along well with the Grald Clan. Maybe bringing Tinia to him was a bad idea.

No, wait. Now that I think about it, you could say that this star system fleet’s inability to stop Red Flag led to Tinia’s current predicament. In that case, maybe he feels beholden to her.

“Please don’t worry about me, General. Whatever the circumstances, well... To be frank, I’m having fun right now.”

“Fun?” General Gem Dar’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Indeed. From outer space, I’ve seen sights I’d never see in the forest. Theta from the outside, Sir Hiro’s spaceship and all its interior technology... It’s as if my world suddenly expanded. I’ve never led such a stimulating life, and I certainly enjoy it.”

“I see. Well, if you run into trouble in the colony, let me know. I’ll do

everything in my power to help. I hold a prestigious position, though not as impressive as your father's."

"Thank you, General."

General Gem Dar acknowledged the smiling Tinia with a nod, then looked at me. "I can contact Chieftain Zesh at any time. Feel free to use the communicator I've readied in the next room."

"Thanks, Your Excellency."

"In all seriousness, please stop that. If you wish to compare rank, a mere star system fleet general is below an honorary Imperial noble." The general gave me a knowing grin.

"I guess. That title got dumped on me so suddenly that it doesn't feel real. Honestly, I'm just a simple mercenary."

"All you can do is adjust to it over time. Viscounts govern at least one star system—often as many as three."

"When you put it that way, it sounds like a big deal."

Why had His Majesty given a merc like me such a position? Did he hope to tie me to the Empire? He could give me all the titles and awards he wanted; I'd still drop it all and run far away if I needed to. I just hadn't done that yet because things hadn't gotten hairy enough.

At any rate, it wasn't a good idea to leave Tinia's dad waiting too long. She and I thanked General Gem Dar and entered the next room, where he'd said the communicator was.

There, we found a machine with a bumpy wooden exterior and what appeared to be vacuum tubes sticking out of it. It looked like an old-timey radio. Who'd use a gadget like this in a universe with handheld holo-display terminals?

"Whoa. What's with this crazy retro-futuristic item?" I asked. "It doesn't fit the setting."

"Setting?"

"Sorry. Don't mind me." Brushing off the confused Tinia, I asked the soldier stationed next to the communicator to contact Zesh. He did so.

A voice eventually emerged from the machine, occasionally interrupted by mechanical noises. “Hello? Can you hear me? This is Zesh.”

“Oh! Yep, all good. The audio’s not exactly high-quality, but I hear you. How come they have this antique here, anyway?”

“It’s a matter of compatibility with Grald Clan communication magic.” Zesh cleared his throat. “But this isn’t the time for such a discussion.” That was fair. Although I was curious, it wasn’t so important that we had to talk about it now.

“Should I apologize for taking Tinia out into space, sacred tree seed and all?” I asked.

“No. The seed chose her as its maiden. As her father, part of me does want to voice complaints...but as chieftain of the Grald Clan, I cannot object.”

“Okay. Well, the situation’s changed a little. The Imperial Fleet arrived, and thanks to a request from their lieutenant colonel, I’ll likely serve alongside them. If your daughter and the seed come with us, they’ll be in danger.”

“Do you mean to eradicate the pirates who attacked Theta?”

Our target *was* Red Flag, so that would be the logical result. “I think that’s likely to happen.”

“Take them with you, then.”

“Father,” Tinia protested, “that will mean endangering the sacred tree seed.”

“I’m aware. I’m obviously overextending my authority by deciding this on my own, but as they say, desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“If we lose the seed, the Grald Clan...”

“Yes, but we shouldn’t separate the seed from its guardian. Either course of action poses risks.”

I didn’t fully understand what they were talking about, but sending Tinia and the seed out without permission from the Chieftains’ Alliance could seemingly hurt Zesh’s position as chieftain and the clan itself.

“Sorry to add fuel to the fire, but I can’t take responsibility for anything that happens,” I warned him. “I’m not planning to die or let her die. Still, let’s be

clear on that.”

“In any event, I cannot force you to accommodate Theta’s needs. There is no other way. I understand this is an audacious request, but please keep my daughter safe.”

“Yeah. I’ll do my best.”

“And...I *do* expect you to keep your hands off her,” Zesh added.

“Father, please. Don’t be rude to Sir Hiro.”

“Well...”

Yeah, I won’t say anything. I know you don’t trust me. I mean, who’d trust a merc with five wives including a Maidroid? Circumstances aside, it would be objectively insane to leave full care of your daughter to a guy like me. I’d have made my distrust clear too.

“Tinia and I are adults,” I said. “We know about the birds and the bees. Now, I don’t have much information about elves, but isn’t your physiological system pretty complex when it comes to that stuff?”

“How did you...?!” Zesh sounded surprised. “Of course... Miss Elma is a member of your crew.”

Like I’d said, the elven, er...reproductive situation...was a bit convoluted. I didn’t know the full details, but elves had a hard time procreating with someone they hadn’t mentally—or rather subconsciously—accepted as their partner. Conversely, if an elf *did* acknowledge you as their partner, that could lead to unwanted burdens.

As I thought this over, I glanced at Tinia, and we made eye contact. Her face suddenly flushed all the way to her ears.

“Just inquiring...in general, you know?” I added.

“O-of course,” she stammered.

“Ahem! *Ahem!*” I heard some very deliberate throat-clearing through the communicator.

But we were on a colony, and Zesh was on terra firma, separated from me

and Tinia by outer space and his planet's atmosphere. No amount of feigned coughing could surmount that distance.

"Anyway," I said, bringing things back on track, "My understanding is that you accept the hazards, and you're still willing to leave Tinia with us. I bet you expect something in return for running those risks, right?"

"Indeed I do. Tinia is to join the hunt for those who harmed the sacred tree; the protector of the seed will strike the final blow. That will be an undeniable military success, and our clan values such feats. The Rosé Clan stands to gain as well by aiding the seed's protector in the hunt. If both the Rosé and Grald Clans agree to that plan, the Minpha Clan won't have a leg to stand on."

"Makes sense. By the way, although I'm fine with taking her with us, bodyguarding isn't exactly free."

"Of course not. It would be difficult to offer you cash, but we shall reward you with a suitable alternative."

"Okay. You've got yourself a deal."

Frankly, the deal kind of sucked for my crew. By offering a reward, though, Zesh had made a formal request for our services. I didn't usually accept requests that didn't go through the mercenary guild, but I could bend the rules for once. After all, I owed Tinia big time.

"In short," I told the crew, who'd gathered in the cafeteria, "Tinia's going to join us on the mission."

"Thank you all so much for having me." Tinia bowed.

The crew reacted by applauding.

"I have no clue *what* you're summarizing when you say 'in short,'" Elma said. "Still, welcome aboard, Tinia."

"I'll buy Tinia's day-to-day necessities," Mimi added.

"Speaking of, you should get a change of clothes," Tina told the elven princess. "You kind of stick out like a sore thumb."

“Think she does?” Wiska mulled it over for a moment. “Yes, perhaps.”

I was relieved to see everyone welcome the announcement. The sacred tree seed didn’t seem to have any complaints, either; it flickered calmly. I’d started to figure out what its patterns meant, and this one signaled a good mood.

“Put very simply, Chieftain Zesh hopes to score points from his clan by having Tinia join us in killing the pirates who attacked the elves. That should help rebuild Tinia’s reputation, too. And *that* annoying little thing wants to be near me at all times, which makes Tinia joining us doubly desirable.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Tinia agreed, while the “annoying little thing” I’d mentioned shone brightly in her arms. Tinia seemed displeased that I’d insulted it, but that seed was at the root of a lot of my problems at the moment.

“You made sure we’d be compensated, right?” Elma reminded me.

“Zesh assured me that he’d prepare a reward.”

“All right. You’re a pushover, though.”

“Yeah, well, I owe Tinia one.”

Tinia cocked her head at that exchange, which made sense. She probably didn’t know that hiring a platinum-rank mercenary like me was extremely expensive. It made sense to call me a pushover when I readily accepted work without setting a specific price—though Zesh probably wouldn’t pay us in money anyway.

That said, I wasn’t the kind of guy to rip off someone I owed my life to, so I thought I’d made a decent compromise. Besides, the reward might turn out to be a nice surprise.

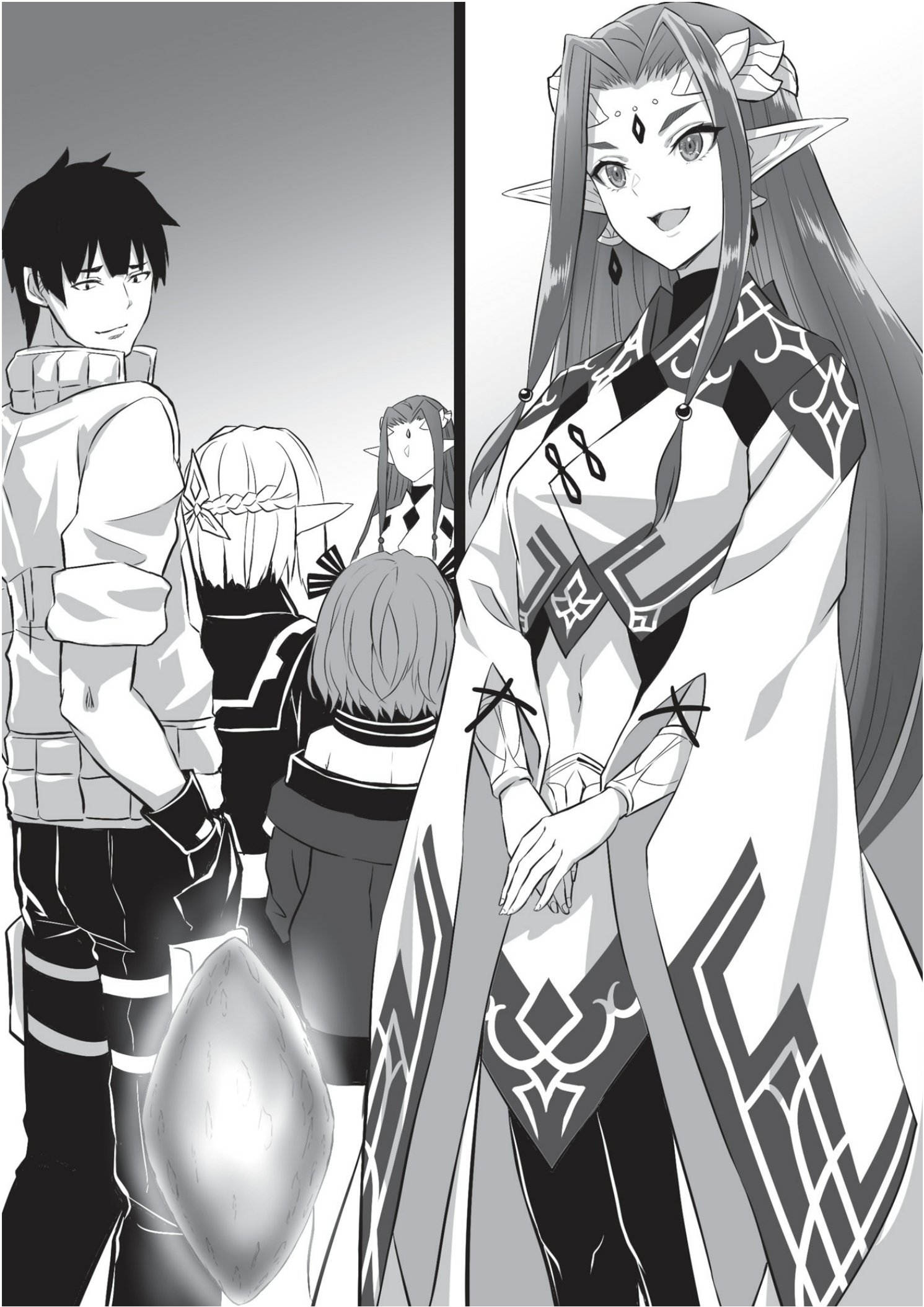
“Ya sure ’bout this? That seed’s real important to them elves.”

“Annoying as it is, it won’t cause us trouble. You won’t, right?” I demanded of the seed. “If you do, I’ll burn you to a crisp with my heavy lasers.”

The top-tier nuisance in Tinia’s arms flashed repeatedly, insisting on its innocence. *Whoa. I did tell that thing to flash once for no and twice for yes. Wow—it remembers my orders surprisingly well.*

“Enough about Tinia. Any reports from the rest of you?” I asked the group.

“Oh, yes! I finished resupplying our cargo and ammunition! We’re ready to launch anytime!” Mimi replied.



“Good work. We have plenty of anti-ship torpedoes in stock, right?”

“Yep! In addition to the four installed on the *Krishna*, there are a dozen in the *Black Lotus*’s reserves.”

“Fantastic. Man, having a mothership is convenient.”

“A dozen?” Elma said dubiously. “What the hell do you plan to go up against?”

You could never have too much ammo, and torpedoes didn’t expire. With sixteen of the missiles, the *Krishna* was packing enough firepower to turn a pirate base into mere space debris.

“We don’t know when we’ll have to launch,” I said, “so let’s get some rest. Actually, no—we need to buy supplies for Tinia. Mind if I leave that to you?” I asked the girls.

“Sure! We’ll take care of it,” Mimi replied.

“Let’s go right now. Wanna join, Hiro?” Elma offered.

“I’ll pass. I’m sure there’s stuff that’s harder to buy with a man around.” Moreover, I knew how long it took girls to shop. That wasn’t bad in itself, but it sucked to just stand there and wait all day.

“We gotta get back to maintenance,” said Tina.

“Right,” Wiska agreed. “The *Krishna*’s ready for action, but the *Black Lotus* was fighting at nearly full capacity.”

“All right. I’ll supervise you two.”

“I don’t mind, but it’s gonna be borin’.”

“No prob. Mimi and Elma, take care of Tinia.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Will do.”

Mimi, Elma, and Tinia went shopping while I stayed on board with Mei and the mechanics. I wouldn’t have much to do, but I was excited to see the twins work their magic.

“How’s maintenance going, anyway?” I asked the twins.

“The *Krishna* is in perfect condition,” said Wiska. “The *Black Lotus* doesn’t seem to have any problems either, but we want to check it thoroughly just in case. Here’s what I mean.”

She showed me a tablet terminal. It displayed what seemed to be various parameters and checklists for the *Black Lotus*, but it was so full of specialized jargon that I couldn’t understand a thing.

“I understand...that I don’t understand this at all.”

“You really don’t want to take this seriously, do you?”

“Come on. Give me a break.” Maybe I could’ve figured some of that stuff out if I’d really buckled down and read it, but it wasn’t worth the effort. Better to leave specialized work to specialists. That said, I could tell the checklists were almost complete; Tina and Wiska probably didn’t have much more to do.

“Either way, don’t push yourselves too hard. Work’s about to get a lot busier—for you two especially.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yeah. Oh—but there might be a limit, since we won’t be able to go back often to sell off ships we’ve captured. Still, we might also get more opportunities to harvest equipment.”

We could capture four ships, tops. Two would fit in the *Black Lotus*’s hangar, and the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* could tow one each. One captured ship could be mid-sized, but three would have to be small.

On top of that, we’d need to disable FTL and hyperdrive to tow a ship, so the process would impede our ability to react. That meant we’d have to wait until after the battle to start towing. We’d also need to be fast; we couldn’t delay the Pirate-Hunting Fleet for the sake of our profits. The real battle for my mechanics would be the short period after our battle ended.

While I discussed the short term with Wiska, Tina returned to the hangar, having finished with a checklist. “Job’s all done! Sing my praises, hon!” Anytime

I treated her like a child, she insisted she was an adult, but she sure loved to be doted on like a kid.

I didn't mind, though; she was cute. "Yeah, yeah. Come here, you. Want in, Wiska?"

"I-I'm fine."

"C'mon, Wis! Let him cuddle ya too. Get over here!" Tina yanked Wiska over and started tousling her sister's hair herself.

"Whoa!"

Naturally, I joined in. *Wow, it feels exactly the same as doing it to Tina. That's twins for you.*

Then I felt eyes on me. Mei was watching silently from the shadows. Her reservedness was definitely an act—she might as well have screamed *Cuddle me too!* After all, if she wanted to monitor us in secret, she wouldn't have done it someplace I could easily spot her. She could watch us just fine using the *Black Lotus's* sensors and cameras.

I stopped cuddling the twins and, without a word, opened my arms wide. Mei emerged from the shadows. Her face remained expressionless yet emanated the faintest joy. It was kind of surreal to watch a girl taller than me bend to offer me her head.

"You really love him, huh, Mei?"

"Yes, I do. I adore him." Mei turned her face toward Tina as she hugged me. Her embrace wasn't too tight or loose; I felt her softness perfectly. Her strength and sturdiness surpassed even the dwarves', so why did she feel so soft when she hugged me? Mei was truly a mystery.

"O-oh," Wiska stammered. "How frank."

"It is important to convey your feelings to loved ones, Miss Wiska."

"Erk... I-I suppose." Wiska looked oddly flustered.

Tina, on the other hand, didn't seem very worried. She clung to me, crying, "Me next! Me next!"

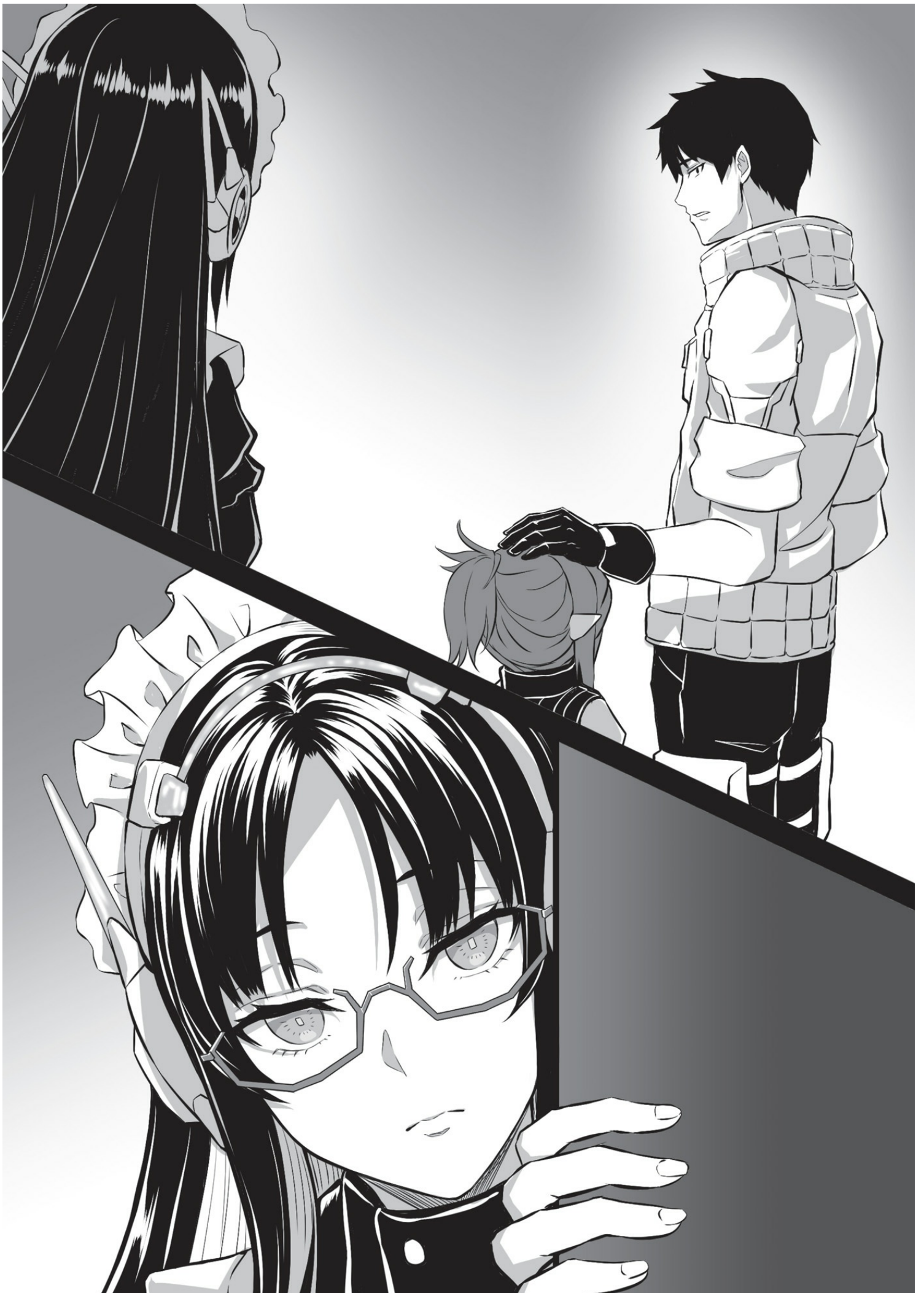
She was more physically expressive than her sister; Wiska seemed to distance herself from that kind of thing.

“Ya say it’s important to convey love, Mei,” Tina added, “but *this* guy always pulls away however pushy we are!”

“Perhaps you should try one more push now, Miss Tina.”

“One more push...?”

It was cute how affectionate Tina was, but if she tried getting pushier at this point, it would require an awfully direct method. In fact, I couldn’t withstand much more from her—in terms of physical strength, that is.



“One more push...”

“Yes. And try to exert yourself more.”

Hey, cut it out. She’s actually gonna do it, and her arms are too strong!

“H-here goes...” said Wiska.

Even Wiska’s bear-hugging me now. What do I do? Why are we huddled together in this huge hangar? Nothing makes sense.

For the next few days, we stood by on Leafil Prime. To assault a major pirate gang, the Empire needed to gather forces from neighboring systems, and right now they were waiting for those forces to arrive.

With resupplying and maintenance completed, my crew and I had little to do. That said, we had a set daily routine, so it wasn’t like we were totally bored. Exercise, training, and research all killed time.

One day, Serena and some subordinate noble officers visited the *Black Lotus*. They’d come after hearing that Mei and I were conducting sword training. They seemingly didn’t have much to do before reinforcements came either.

“Do you train like this every day?” Serena asked.

“Yeah. Why?” I responded.

“I see...”

“Here I come, Master,” Mei declared.

“We have spectators today. Don’t humiliate me, okay?”

“Understood. I will fight my hardest.”

“Why don’t you *listen*?!” My plea fell on deaf ears. Mei closed in like a black gale, metal training sword in hand. I faced her, armed with my own metal training sword.

Why not use safer swords for training? Well, nothing else could withstand our speed and force. I can’t tell you how many supposedly reliable training weapons we’d shattered.

A silver flash raced forward from behind Mei. Taking that hit head-on wouldn't just break bone; I'd sustain organ damage and puke blood. Letting it land obviously wasn't an option.

I slid sideways, evading Mei's blade by a hairsbreadth. At the same time, I tossed my sword to my left hand and aimed for her wrist. She pulled her blade back before I struck; my counterattack hit nothing but air. I jumped back and put distance between us before she could move, knowing that she'd target my open left flank next.

Our blows rained back and forth. Mei's sword intercepted all my slashes, and I managed to evade or parry all her strikes.

It wasn't just my body that couldn't afford to take the brunt of a blow from Mei; my sword wouldn't withstand a full-on block either. The sheer impact of parrying one of her strikes directly would either break my blade or send it flying out of my hands. Either would spell trouble for me.

In the end, Mei won. I failed to parry a blow, and my sword broke in my hand. After that, I was just putting off the inevitable checkmate. Mei gradually cornered me, then unleashed a ferocious kick to my gut that sent me flying into the wall. No matter what, it was impossible to hold back the inevitable physical reaction to a one-two attack like that.

"Gah!" Before I even caught my breath, Mei's sword tapped the crown of my head, signaling my loss. "Sparring with you is impossible..." I groaned.

"Not at all, Master. Your reaction speed has risen approximately eight percent since our last session and still has room to increase."

"Ya don't have to get that tough on him," Tina chastised the Maidroid, unable to bear the sight.

Mei helped me up, and I rubbed my stomach. It ached badly. I definitely had internal bleeding.

"Hey!" I called to Serena's soldiers. "Anyone feeling rusty can get one of Mei's perfectly safe training sessions. Free for a limited time!"

"That hardly looked safe to me," Serena interjected.

“Don’t be silly. It’s as safe as can be! Just look at me. I’m not dead, right?” I puffed out my chest. *Ow, okay. Tummy hurts too much. Never mind.* “Sorry... uh...I’m gonna head to the medical pod. Take care of our guests for me.”

“Yes, Master.” Mei bowed and turned to Serena’s entourage. Maybe it was my imagination, but for a moment, a collective shudder seemed to pass through the group.

It’s safe. She won’t kill you. Don’t worry!

When I’d recovered and returned to the hangar where we trained, I found the noble officers battered and exhausted. Lieutenant Colonel Serena was looking them over with a wry grin.

“You didn’t join in, Lieutenant Colonel?” I joked.

“I can hardly risk injury before an impending battle. Perhaps afterward.”

“Of course, Miss Serena,” Mei assented. Obviously, she hadn’t broken a sweat and showed no sign of fatigue. She was a Maidroid, to be fair.

“Okay, I can’t offer much hospitality, but if you come this way, we do have a lounge.” Once I’d set the Imperial officers free in the lounge, I sat face to face with Serena. “So?” I asked. “What really brings you here today?”

“I’m here to discuss the operation. They’re here as bodyguards and tourists.”

“Our ship isn’t a tourist trap, you know.”

While Serena and I talked, Mimi brought a tray with tea and sweets. “Nice to see you again, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“It’s been a while since we met face to face, hasn’t it, Lady Mimi?”

“Um, ‘Lady’ isn’t necessary.”

“Really? Very well, Mimi.” Serena had helped us get in contact with the Imperial family, so she knew that Mimi was related to the Emperor.

“Thanks. ‘Mimi’ is fine.”

“Uh, so about that operation—want to tell me more?” I urged.

“Of course. According to our intel, the pirates have quite a number of small bases in surrounding systems.”

“I won’t ask how you got that info.”

“Wise decision.” Serena smiled at me.

If your ship was destroyed during a fight, it was much less likely to be lethal within a planet’s atmosphere than in outer space. After all, even if your life-support systems were destroyed, you wouldn’t die instantly. As long as your cockpit and escape pod worked, you and your crew stood a decent chance.

During the Red Flag drop raid on Leafil IV the other day, Mei had used the *Black Lotus* to down a number of pirate ships. They would’ve been able to take plenty of prisoners, and the Imperial Fleet and Grakkan Empire overall were merciless, especially toward pirates. They’d saddle the lucky ones with hard labor for life, and lots of others would wind up with roles such as guinea pigs in inhumane experiments. You can guess the Empire wasn’t known for its gentle interrogation techniques.

“So, how do we attack those small bases? Split up our forces and crush them all at once?”

“Close,” Serena replied. “We’ll blockade the star systems, then mop up one system at a time.”

“Oh. Got it.”

Red Flag wasn’t the kind of pirate gang that could thrive within one giant base. They’d built multiple small bases in several star systems, creating a vast pirate network. Destroying one base would do little to harm them; if we were going to the effort of attacking them, we’d need to destroy every base in the system at least.

The plan was for Serena to seize and blockade hyperlane entrances leading to and from the target system, trapping pirates going in or out. Then we’d annihilate every base in the system, gradually eroding Red Flag’s influence.

“For this to work,” I said, “we’ll need to know the precise number and locations of their bases, right?”

“We obtained that information. That’s why we decided on this strategy.”

“Nice work.” Had the Empire identified elites among the captured pirates, or salvaged navigation data from the wreckage of downed ships? I didn’t know, but regardless, they seemingly knew everything. “But your Pirate-Hunting Unit isn’t big enough to blockade a whole system, is it? Where are you going to get the forces?”

“Primarily from local star system fleets. That said, we’re also summoning Imperial Fleet units from nearby systems to shore up our numbers.”

“I see. So the attack itself will be up to your Pirate-Hunting Unit and us mercenaries.”

“Correct. I plan to dispatch you as a mobile force.”

“Roger that. Same as usual, then.” Serena understood that the *Krishna*’s mobility and firepower were way more useful flying freely than within a formation. “And the *Black Lotus* will provide support fire?”

“I would appreciate that. Its firepower is quite reliable, and an EML’s strength and range are suitable for a siege.”

“No doubt.”

The large-bore EML on the *Black Lotus*’s bow was extremely powerful. Solid ammo was normally weak against shield-based defenses, but a large-bore EML could pierce right through them, which would obviously deal massive damage to a ship’s plating and hull. It was perfect for taking down stationary targets, but physical ammo traveled a lot slower than lasers, so the EML’s long-range accuracy against moving targets was poor. Fortunately, Mei’s incredible aim definitely helped compensate for that.

“What’s the plan for the bases? Just destroy them on sight?”

“Exactly.” Serena shrugged, adding bluntly, “We have many targets this time, after all.” She took a sip of the tea Mimi had brewed.

Red Flag’s usual dirty business included kidnapping for ransom and selling illegal slaves. You can figure out for yourself how ransom worked. When it came to illegal trafficking, the pirates attacked planetary settlements, colonies,

merchant groups, and passenger ships to abduct innocent people, “processed” them to meet demand, and sold them.

In other words, their bases probably contained quite a few human “products.” If we destroyed those bases outright... You get the picture. But people who bought slaves from space pirates had disgusting fetishes, and captives “processed” to suit their needs often sustained irreversible damage. Enabling those captives to return to the lives they’d lived before took a whole lot of work and even more luck.

“You look unhappy,” Serena mused.

“Do I? Probably because I am. Don’t worry about it, though.”

I didn’t like talking about them, but there were sometimes problems you couldn’t solve. I wasn’t up to rehabilitating the pirates’ victims, and Serena probably wasn’t either. If we couldn’t save the captives, maybe halting their suffering was the most mercy we could offer. This slavery problem wouldn’t come to an end unless the Empire got serious about it.

“Hmm,” said Serena. “You know, there’s a side of you that’s surprisingly endearing.”

“Put a sock in it. More importantly, when do you expect to have your full force assembled?”

“We should be ready in approximately thirty-eight hours, per the schedule. Prepare yourself—both physically and mentally, I mean.”

“Aye aye.”

My reply seemingly satisfied Serena, who led her entourage back to the *Lestarius*.

Aw, man. There I go brooding about stuff. Better hang out with the girls and perk myself back up. I set an alarm for the time Serena had mentioned and went to wander around the ship.

Chapter 3:

Lockdown and Cleanup

TWO HOURS LATER, I was in the cockpit, prepping the *Krishna* for launch.

“Don’t we have thirty-six hours left?” Mimi asked me.

“Yeah.”

“So why are you preparing to launch now?”

“Mimi, if you heard that a heavily armed gang would come to your house in thirty-six hours, what would you do?”

“Huh?” she cocked her head. “Um, run somewhere safe?”

“Exactly. That’s what the pirates are doing,” I replied, running the *Krishna*’s self-diagnosis program. *Okay, all clear. Ammo’s full, too. The twins didn’t miss anything.*

“You’re saying they’ll try to flee the Leafil System?”

“Exactly. It’s almost time for everyone to get moving. That’s why we’re getting ready.”

Elma jumped in. “The fact that Leafil Prime has an elven majority makes it harder for non-elves to pull anything unnoticed, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t outlaws,” she explained. “Some might work with the space pirates, so the pirates have probably heard that Serena and her Pirate-Hunting Unit are gearing up for something big.”

“I bet Serena wants to take advantage of that,” I added. “She’ll probably start the operation ahead of schedule to take them by surprise.”

“Gotcha,” said Mimi. “Think the pirates will fall for it? And does she have enough ships?”

“I’m sure she’s got it all planned out. At any rate, I’m not counting on launching at the time she told me.” Some people said that, if you wanted to trick your enemies, you had to start by tricking your allies. They had a point; you

never know where information might leak. I figured Serena was trying to fool the pirates by deliberately letting false intel slip. How effective would her ploy be? I'd have to get a good look at her results. "Either way, we're here to get paid, so we obey the client's orders. Mei, the *Krishna*'s ready to launch anytime."

"Understood," Mei replied through the communicator. "I am performing launch procedures. Upon launching, we will form a convoy with consort ships and begin synchronized travel."

"I'll leave the flight plan to you." I hung up and reclined deeply into my pilot's seat. It was comfortable, no doubt designed for long flights. "When you get down to brass tacks, we're just standing by until the real fight begins, same as usual. So take it easy...especially *you*." I looked at Tinia, who was curled up shivering in the copilot's seat.

"Taking it easy hardly seems possible," she protested. "How can you all be so calm?" The seed of the sacred tree flickered gently in her arms, as if trying to soothe her, though it didn't seem to help much.

"You get used to it," I replied.

Elma shrugged. "Basically."

"And we trust Master Hiro!" Mimi chimed in.

"Really...?"

Wow, girls. Tinia couldn't possibly find any of that helpful, could she? "If this is still too scary, you could stay in the *Black Lotus*," I offered.

"No. As the seed's maiden, I must stay by its guardian's side, especially in battle."

"I mean we're battling in space—you can't do anything to help. We're not going to fight with swords or magic."

"Nevertheless." Tinia remained firm.

Okay, then; she'd just have to adjust to this. *Actually, I'd better ask Mimi about taking precautions. There's still time.* "Just in case, Mimi, do you still have *those*...? Is it okay if Tinia wears one?"

“Oh. I’m not sure. Tinia, come with me. Elma, can you help?”

“If I must...”

Mimi and Elma pushed the bewildered Tinia out of the cockpit. After a while, they all returned, Tinia blushing madly.

Yeah, your first time out, you really need a diaper. It may be embarrassing, but you’ll just have to put up with it. Wetting yourself in battle isn’t fun.

“Movement detected in Sector 3C!” Serena roared over the comms. “Full speed ahead!”

“Yeah, yeah!” I groaned.

Things were busy. I’d honestly underestimated how hectic they would get. Why were we so harried? Because space was *teeming* with pirates. While gathering her forces, however, Serena had seemingly prepared to annihilate Red Flag completely.

“Military recon satellites *and* FTL trap arrays,” Elma observed. “What a spread.”

“You don’t normally see weapons like those outside international war zones,” I agreed. “She went all out.”

Let me explain Serena’s strategy. First, she’d positioned high-spec military recon satellites in sectors between Red Flag’s bases and the hyperlane entrances, allowing her to quickly detect pirates trying to flee. Meanwhile, she’d placed anti-FTL traps—interdictors used for defending bases—near hyperlane entrances, preventing the pirates from restarting their FTL drives. We mercenaries, along with Serena’s corvettes and destroyers, seized or destroyed the pirates as they panicked.

“Apprehending target!”

“Ready anytime.”

I targeted a ship spinning in circles, unable to compensate for its forcibly disabled FTL drives, and fired four heavy lasers. Whether the vessel exploded and killed the passengers would be totally up to the pirates’ luck, since

targeting and disabling ship functions was impossible while they whirled around like that.

“Zap zap zap,” I muttered. “Whoa. This one’s surprisingly tough.”

Merciless rays of destructive green light had struck the pirate ship’s shields, but to my surprise, it withstood the laser barrage. It was a little too sturdy for a typical pirate vessel.

Someone aboard the ship was screeching something like “Stop!” over the comms.

Not that I was about to listen. “Well, no. I’m not stopping.”

Even if the pirate surrendered, we had no time to slow down and take prisoners, and the *Krishna* didn’t have room for them anyway. I didn’t have the cargo space for an escape pod; it’d literally be the size of my cockpit. Besides, pirates never surrendered unless they were really screwed. They knew they’d get experimented on or something if they were captured, which was a fate worse than death.

“The target’s pilot ejected,” Mimi announced.

“Whoa. That’s rare. All right, mark the ship and escape pod.”

“Aye aye!”

By marking them, I could leave the pirate ship and its cargo for later, then claim them as loot. If I left the escape pod, the military would come for the pilot; he’d be a vital source of information, after all.

“Sector 3C clear,” I said over comms.

“Understood. Relocate to Sector 7D at once.”

“Roger that. Relocating to Sector 7D.” I activated the FTL drive and headed for the designated point. Naturally, Serena’s anti-FTL traps were programmed to distinguish friend from foe perfectly. Accidentally obstructing an ally’s FTL would’ve been more than a nuisance.

“Anti-FTL traps are incredibly useful,” said Mimi. “Shouldn’t we have some?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Never tried them.” FTL traps *had* existed in *Stella Online*,

but I didn't know much about them; I'd never seen them used in-game.

"They're designed for full military vessels. I doubt they're compatible with our ship," Elma explained. "Besides, they may have a wider range and more strength than normal interdictors, but they're not maneuverable, so they aren't much use to mercs. You can't use their range to the fullest if you aren't running a recon network or observation fleet."

"There you have it, Mimi."

"I see." Mimi looked amazed by Elma's analysis.

Her knowledge impressed me too, honestly. Elma's experience and wisdom came in handy at times like this. Although I was knowledgeable about *Stella Online*, there were lots of things outside the game that I knew nothing about.

"Interdictor technology was apparently developed by researchers trying to create much more destructive weapons. I think they wanted to call it something like a Gravity Blast, or a Super-Graviton Cannon."

"Careful, Elma! You could infringe on copyright!"

"Er...what?"

"Nothing. Sorry."

I couldn't help piping up. Those names... Well, interdictors *were* created from technology that controlled gravity, inertia, mass, or whatever. Maybe turning gravity into a weapon naturally led to names that sounded copyrighted.

"If I could continue," said Elma, "as the researchers improved the device's range, its destructive force attenuated to the extent that it failed as a weapon. But its basic functions *could* inhibit FTL travel over a wide area."

"Interesting," I said.

While we listened to Elma's endless knowledge, we reached the target sector. Turning off our FTL drive, I discovered another pirate ship careening out of control.

"Apprehending and destroying target," I announced.

"Aye aye!"

As far as I can tell, Serena's strategy is going without a hitch. We've already culled so many pirates that Leafil System cleanup ought to be easy.

In thirty hours the rest of our forces would arrive, and the operation would be in full swing. The only question was how many more enemies we'd capture right now.

"At times like this, I'm glad we made the *Krishna* so comfy to live in," I mused.

"Absolutely," Elma agreed. "Mimi really knows how to plan ahead."

"Th-think so?" Mimi chuckled, smiling shyly at the praise we offered.

We were about six hours into the star system blockade, which had begun before the complete force's projected arrival time. The flood of pirates had slowed to a drip, so we were enjoying a short break in the *Krishna*'s dining room. Mercenaries mobilized for this job were permitted to dock in a larger Imperial Fleet ship to rest if desired, but the *Krishna* didn't need to.

"Was that gentle enough for you, Tinia?" I asked.

"Yes. It wasn't as frightening as I'd expected."

"Thanks to the FTL traps, it was basically shooting fish in a barrel," said Elma.

After all, we'd merely needed to shoot down the ships caught and immobilized in the FTL trap. We hadn't been attacked, either, as if the ships that *could* still move were too demoralized to fight. Tinia's diaper had gone unsoiled.

For some reason, Mimi started smugly showing off her experience to Tinia. "We're just getting started. The real battle's ahead of us!"

Tinia took Mimi seriously, which only made it funnier. "That is true. I will prepare myself."

"Ya sure we don't need maintenance?" Tina asked worriedly from the other end of the holo-display. Since we were all taking a break right now, she and I had started a video call.

"Don't worry. We haven't used up any physical ammunition, and we mostly

shot stationary targets.”

Elma backed me up. “Just focus on your job there. I ran self-diagnostics just in case—like Hiro said, nothing’s amiss.”

“No? All right then, I s’pose.”

“You and Wiska be careful.”

“Aye aye.”

After Tina’s surprisingly indifferent reply, the call cut off abruptly. The twins were probably busy as hell sorting through loot; we’d spent the first hour of our free time plundering ships we’d tagged.

“Seems like our side took virtually no damage,” I noted.

“That’s the big advantage of FTL traps,” said Elma. “If you play your cards right, you start from a position of power, so you won’t necessarily take damage.”

“Plus, our enemies are only pirates.”

One pirate ship *had* had oddly sturdy shields, though. What was the deal with that one? Had it belonged to a higher-up in Red Flag, or maybe just an ordinary person who came to bargain with the pirates? Either way, they’d bailed out in their cockpit block, and I’d tagged them, so the Imperial Fleet was no doubt interrogating them right now.

Amen—just as I finished praying for them, I received a call. *What? From the Lestarius? Must be Serena.* “Captain Hiro of the *Krishna* speaking.”

“Ah. Apologies for disturbing your little break.”

“Hey, Lieutenant Colonel. What’s up?”

As I’d expected, Serena, the operation commander, was on the line. She surely didn’t have time to make small talk with a mere mercenary, not even a platinum-ranker with a Gold Star.

“Let me be frank. Do you recall tagging a ship you targeted today after the pilot bailed out?”

“Yeah, of course. It was unusually tough for a pirate vessel. What about it?”

“Would you be willing to hand the contents of its jettisoned cockpit block over to us? I’m afraid I can’t answer questions about the request.” She looked serious.

After a moment of thought, I agreed. “Okay. And as far as I’m concerned, we didn’t see it either. Want me to delete the logs, too?”

“Yes, please.”

“Aye aye.” I saluted the holo-display.

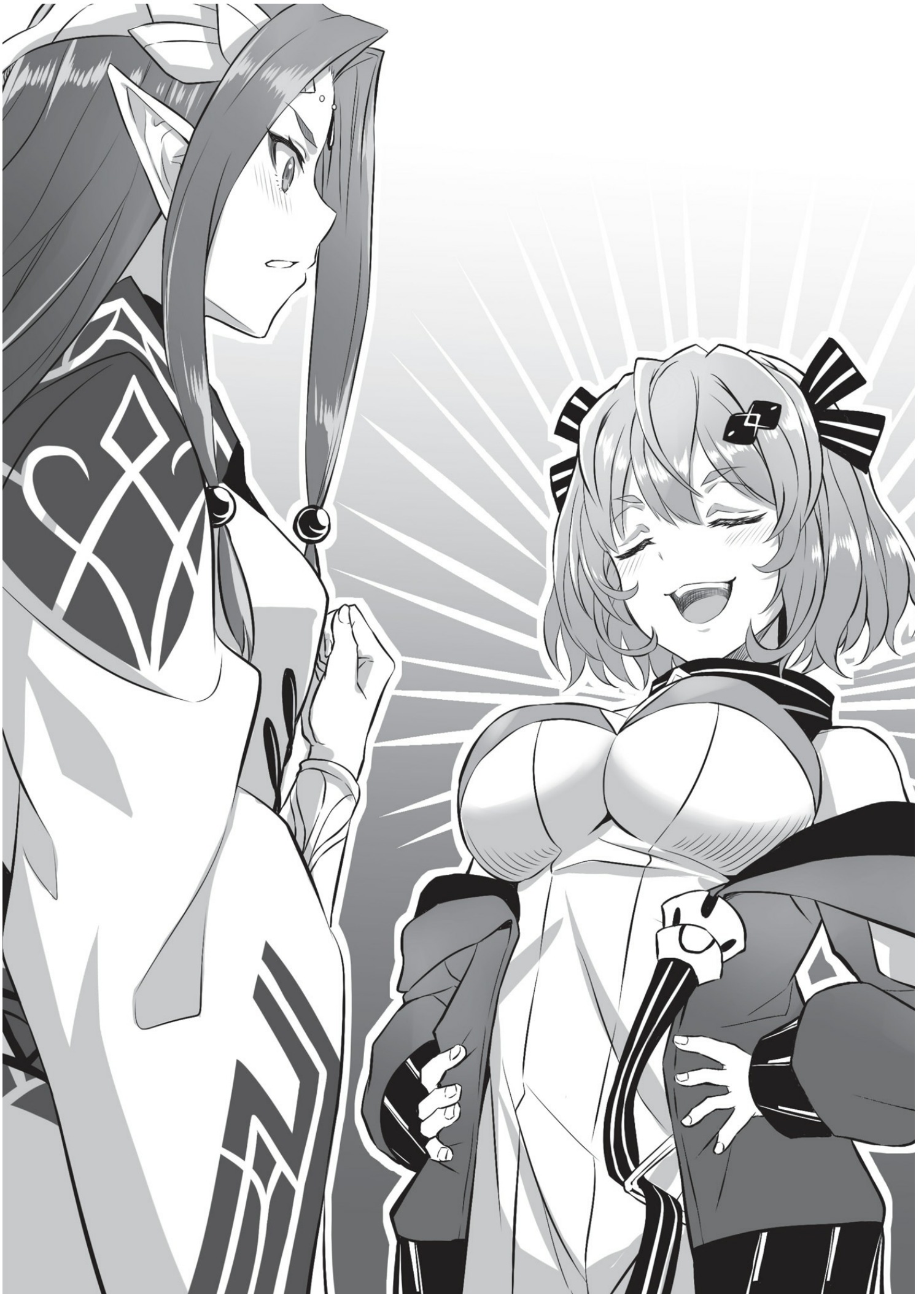
“Goodbye.” Serena nodded quickly and hung up.

“What do you think that was about?” Elma asked.

“Dunno. Either way, I smell trouble. We saw nothing, and we remember nothing.” I typed a message to Mei to delete the logs acknowledging the pirate ship from the *Krishna*’s system. This was a pretty corrupt—well, maybe *dubious*—way of doing things, but under the circumstances I had her go ahead anyway.

“Yeah,” said Elma. “Sounds like that’ll be for the best.”

Serena had seemed somber about the situation; it was probably some aristocratic or military scandal. *Too scary for me. I’ll steer clear of that kind of event, thanks. Is there any wood around to knock on?*



“Aren’t you curious, though?” Tinia cocked her head; the troublemaker in her arms blinked in agreement. Tinia aside, *that* thing taking an interest made me want even more badly to forget the odd pirate ship.

“If I said *wasn’t*, I’d be lying, but what do you think will happen if we stick our necks out when we shouldn’t?”

“What do you mean?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Serena—a powerful noblewoman who climbed the Imperial Fleet’s ranks despite her young age—demanded we hand that cockpit over. There’s a ninety-percent chance that it’s connected to some martial or noble disaster waiting to happen.”

“If we get involved,” Elma added, “we’ll head straight into that disaster.”

“...I’ll forget I heard anything,” Tinia replied.

The situation was so daunting, even an elf who knew little about Grakkan nobility gave up after a quick warning. Fools rushed in where angels feared to tread; you should let sleeping dogs lie; basically, we recognized that we should give this a wide berth.

“By the way, Hiro, what do you think of the Lieutenant Colonel’s strategy?”

“Hmm. Good question. It is kind of weird. I mean, it’s working, but...I get the feeling that, behind the scenes, scheming is going on.”

“How so?”

“Well, this operation’s whole point is supposedly to destroy Red Flag. But I mean...it feels like there’s some ulterior motive, right?” No, I didn’t have proof; Serena’s actions just seemed suspicious. Locking down the star system ahead of schedule, agreeing that I should forget what I’d seen...

The early FTL lockdown indicated to me that Serena had deliberately given false information on her plans. Now that I thought about it, it was fishy that the planetary defenses in the Leafil System had been broken *twice* in such a short time, leading to two drop raids. It practically stank of something suspicious.

“That’s my opinion, at least,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” Tinia agreed. “Now that you mention it, something seems off about this.”

“After all, planetary drop raids aren’t exactly easy,” Mimi added.

“Of course not. Pirates find it much simpler to target merchant ships on their way through space,” Elma noted. “Civilian colonies and planets are under His Majesty’s direct protection. Imperial power vouchsafes their safety and livelihoods.”

“So pirates attacking those places hurts the Empire’s reputation?”

“Right. Thus, even large pirate gangs rarely work up the nerve to attack planetary settlements.” Elma punctuated this observation with a shrug. She was right that pirates normally avoided that. To the Empire, pirates damaging personal or corporate ships was just a nuisance. However, attacks on planetary settlements and colonies were a different story—a big enough deal to set the Pirate-Hunting Unit on the attackers immediately. “At any rate, all we can do is finish our work quietly and pray we don’t get wrapped up in whatever this mess is,” Elma added. “Not that I’ll get my hopes up.”

“We’re just too convenient a tool,” I sighed. “A pawn you can send into any danger, expecting it to destroy half the enemy force and come out unscathed, is too powerful not to use. *I’d* exploit me, too.”

“On top of that, if you *want* to use a pawn, you’ll certainly choose the nimble one that can fight both in space and on land. And you’re a strong enough swordsman to more than hold your own against sword-loving nobles.”

“Man, I didn’t want to hear that. *I’d* rather just fight in space...” Not to brag, but since we were using chess terms, I was more like a queen the player didn’t need to worry about losing. In light of that, I could only imagine the Empire’s first move would be to throw me and my crew onto the front line. “Okay, stop talking about this. Thinking it over just spoils my mood. Let’s take quick baths, then stand by in the cockpit.”

“Good idea. Who’s going first?” Mimi asked.

“You can, Mimi,” Elma replied. “While you’re at it, you can show Tinia how to use the facilities.”

“Aw. You’re just asking me to do that because you want to go in with Master Hiro afterward, aren’t you?”

“Psh...I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Elma averted her eyes to avoid Mimi’s questioning. *Oh ho. Now, that’d be nice, huh? Great idea. I’m suddenly feeling way more motivated.*

“Okay, you can have the bath,” Mimi told Elma. “But I want naptime, okay?”

“Sure. It’s a deal.”

“See you soon!” Mimi called happily as she ran off to the ship’s living quarters, where the bath was, dragging a blushing Tinia with her. As I watched them leave, I tried to come up with something to talk to Elma about. I couldn’t get away with teasing her about the exchange she’d just had with Mimi.

“By the way, Hiro...” Elma said.

“What’s up?”

“What do you plan to do with Tinia?”

“As in...?” I averted my eyes from Elma’s accusatory gaze, looking up in the cockpit. If Tinia wanted to drop everything and come with us, I was willing to take her. She might be sheltered, but she was an adult. I could accept adults’ decisions. “She won’t try to stay with us *indefinitely*, right?”

“I wonder.”

“I don’t think so, at least.” I was only hazarding a guess. Tinia might be enjoying her taste of the wider universe, but her feet seemed firmly planted in local affairs.

“Well, I guess you know her best. If you say so, maybe you’re right.”

“Yeah, probably,” I insisted. “So don’t try to light a fire under her, okay?”

“I won’t. That would really start trouble. Still, if she did request it, I know you’d take her aboard. You’re such a sucker for girls.”

“Yeah, especially pretty ones. Like you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere... Okay, maybe later I’ll reward you a *bit*.”

“Hell yeah!”

Once Mimi and Tinia finished bathing, Elma and I had lots of fun together in the bath. She made good on her promise to reward me, much to my satisfaction.

Elma and I went to and from the bath, Tinia's eyes seemed a little... fascinated...for some reason. *Is she some kind of secret pervert?*

About thirty hours later, the Imperial Fleet—more precisely, Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit—had gathered its auxiliary forces on schedule. The attack on Red Flag's Leafil System bases began.

"Our target is enemy base Bravo," Mimi declared.

"Two pirate bases in the same system, huh? How long were the pirates been planning those attacks?"

Pirate bases come in all shapes and sizes, but they were usually built into fairly large asteroids. The pirates hollowed the core and built living spaces within. When they needed to expand, they towed in other asteroids and linked them up.

Why go to all that trouble? To make it harder for Imperial forces, local police fleets, and mercs like me to find them. Bases inside asteroids were easier to conceal than completely artificial structures. And most star systems had tons of asteroids, so it wasn't like you could check each and every one. Unless you were machine intelligence, maybe—I wondered if they have countermeasures. But in *Stella Online*, anyway, that was the rationale for all the bases built inside asteroids.

By the way, there were even bases that used special structures with unusually advanced stealth features. They were pretty rare, though. I'd seen one in a *Stella Online* event that had a cool sci-fi look, like a polyhedron with way too many sides. Its stealth features staved off radar, but didn't protect it from players' anti-ship reactive torpedoes, EML cannons, or missiles.

"Building a base isn't free, and it's time-consuming," Elma said. "If there are two bases here, Red Flag has been planning to hunt elves for a while. Makes you wonder if they have some rich buyers..."

“Buyers?” Tinia piped up unhappily. Of course it was jarring to hear that the pirates were treating her people as products.

“In the end, piracy’s just a business,” I told her. “If they’re serious enough to build two bases, they think they can make enough money to offset the investment. We’ve got to assume they have buyers who’ll pay hand over fist for elves.” Even if those customers weren’t purchasing *tons* of illegal slaves, there would probably be plenty of people trying to buy them. Elves were generally beautiful and long-lived. They even had latent psionic abilities. “Well, maybe I’m overthinking it. But the long and short of it is that elves are valuable.”

“They’re usually pretty, after all,” Mimi chimed in.

Elma and Tinia looked glum.

“I appreciate the compliments,” said Elma, “but it doesn’t feel good to be called a valuable prospective slave.”

“Agreed.”

Fair enough. I’d be weirded out if someone said I’d sell for a ton because I looked cute.

“Enough discussing things we don’t want to think about,” I declared. “It’s almost time to get going.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Our convoy’s synchronized journey ended in no time, and we arrived at pirate base Bravo. Serena’s main force was mostly a combo of Pirate-Hunting Unit ships and mercenaries like me. Incidentally, the Leafil System fleet focusing on pirate base Alpha consisted mostly of Rosé Clan forces, along with the Imperial Fleet’s mixed squadron sourced from nearby star systems. From what I’d heard, the Leafil fleet was eager to polish its tarnished reputation.

“I’m getting nervous,” Tinia said.

“Really?” I asked. “Don’t let your guard down, but I think you can take it easy.”

“Why’s that?”

“Remember how many pirate ships the FTL traps snagged? Their vessels were

swarming the area. I doubt even half their forces are left in the bases.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But like Hiro said, don’t let your guard down,” Elma added. “You never know what cornered rats will do.”

“No kidding,” I said. “They might even go crazy and break a Singing Crystal or something.”

“That’d be a problem, all right.” Mimi grimaced at the possibility. Singing Crystals were dangerous items that, when broken, summoned tons of crystal life-forms. In *Stella Online*, you used them to trigger raid events; in this universe, they were outright illegal to possess.

Come to think of it, what even are those things? It’s kind of crazy that just breaking one causes warps in time and space, right? It seems like analyzing them might lead to new FTL tech.

“Hey. Focus. We’re about to warp out,” Elma warned me.

“Whoops, my bad. Let’s get started.”

In sync with the *Krishna*’s trademark boom, the rays shooting through space snapped back into stars.

“Message to all ships from your commander,” Serena announced over comms. “Eliminate resistance from the enemy base. Large ships, destroy base’s defense modules via precision bombardment. Smaller ships, eliminate interception craft. Carrier-based aircraft, defend large ships.”

“Roger that. Let’s do this.”

“Aye aye! Changing sensor range to combat mode,” Mimi announced.

“Swapping generator from cruise to combat output,” Elma added. “Weapons systems activated. Subsystems on standby. We’re good to go anytime.”

“Okay. No need to push ourselves, girls. Slow and steady.”

“Really? You aren’t gonna charge in and try to rack up kills again?”

“If it was just us, I might, but not even I’m stupid enough to do that with Tinia aboard.”

“I’m sorry if I’m holding you back,” Tinia said sadly.

“Don’t put it that way!” Mimi reassured her. “You’re more like...a well-tuned braking system.”

Can’t deny that. We know there aren’t many enemies, so I definitely would’ve charged straight in if Tinia wasn’t here.

“I wonder how Hiro goes ‘slow and steady’?” Elma chuckled.

“Hard to imagine,” joked Mimi.

“Come on, girls. Do you think I’m just some kind of guy who’d run into the enemy formation yelling ‘Yeehaw!’?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“You definitely would.”

“Guilty as charged, but I’ve just never fought any other way in my life!”

My cheek twitched. Yes, I’d always used specific strategies in battle—focused on breaking through, wild melees, and flashy victories. Still, it was just rude of them to write me off as a daredevil who knew no tactics but charging in. *I’ll show you two I can fight with my brain. Just you watch.*

“This is a fleet battle against a stationary target,” I declared. “So we’ll need to start by letting the long-range large ships—the big Imperial craft and *Black Lotus*—get a clear line of fire on the enemy while we push forward alongside the other ships. In my defense, the *Krishna*’s high mobility and strong shields *would* be well-suited to charging in and attracting the pirates’ antiaircraft guns in order to help the other ships attack the base unassailed.”

“But we’re not doing that this time, right?” Mimi prodded.

“Nope. I’m confident that we could slip easily through a pirate gang’s shoddy antiaircraft fire, but I’m scared of us getting shot in the back. I’d also hate it if friendly fire blocked our retreat and we had to charge head-on into that antiaircraft fire.” Pirate laser cannon and multi-cannon fire honestly weren’t a big deal, but the munitions in their bases’ defensive modules were nothing to scoff at. Whether the pirates could hit us was up for debate; still, they were strong. “Eyes forward, girls. The bombardment’s about to start.”

“This is command. We are now commencing bombardment. All ships, steer clear of our line of fire.”

The *Krishna*’s main screen displayed the planned bombardment area in crimson. Flying into that zone would block our escape routes and expose us to anti-aircraft fire.

Laser cannons, large EMLs, and more fired from cruisers, battleships, the *Lestarius*, the *Black Lotus*, and other vessels, covering the pirate base with explosions. Large-bore, high-output laser cannons created destructive shockwaves that vaporized the target’s surface instantly. You’d expect lasers to melt or pierce things; low-output lasers might. For instance, attacks from laser-beam emitters were like that. But high-output laser cannons actually flashed brightly for a moment, then basically caused an explosion.

Hm? What about the *Black Lotus*’s EML, you ask? Well, when the artillery struck the target, it left one hell of a hole. Its impact destroyed the interior and left an equally huge hole as it exited. Frankly, EML artillery’s ability to pierce and destroy from within made it better than a laser cannon for destroying structures. A large-bore laser cannon caused serious explosions and damage, granted, but its impact didn’t extend far beneath the surface. The Empire’s latest models might’ve raised the bar...but this wasn’t the time to ponder weapons specs.

“Okay, time to approach the base,” I said. “Looks like it’s taking heavy damage from the bombardment, but be wary of anti-aircraft fire regardless.”

“Aye aye!” the crew replied in unison.

It was important to stay with the rest of the fleet, but if we moved too slowly and got simultaneously blown away by the pirates’ anti-aircraft fire, that would defeat the purpose.

I got onto the comms channel for the vanguard—a mix of mercenaries and Pirate-Hunting Unit corvettes. “*Krishna* speaking,” I declared. “We’ll go ahead and draw the base’s fire. You speed in meanwhile.”

I opened the throttle to accelerate. Entering firing range would obviously focus the pirates’ anti-aircraft fire on the *Krishna*, *but*—

“Good job, Serena,” I muttered. “That suppressive fire is insanely precise.”

Thanks to Serena precisely targeting the base’s most dangerous weapons and wiping them out for us, the *Krishna* wasn’t yet taking strong enough laser fire to attenuate its shields much. The pirates flung up a defensive barrage, but it was thin. Almost all their large-bore lasers were already rubble.

“Their antiaircraft fire is really weakening.” Elma stopped. “Hm...”

“Something wrong?”

“No, I don’t think so... But it’s strange. Our shields ought to be taking more damage. Wait. Aren’t they recharging fast...? Is the *Krishna*’s generator output *increasing*?”

“The hell?”

Although Elma was uncharacteristically confused, what she’d mentioned didn’t seem bad. *Still, it’s kind of scary if our generator output is rising for no apparent reason. I don’t mind that, if it helps, but you could define that as unstable output. I’ll need Tina and Wiska to check it later.*

“Tinia?” said Mimi. “Is your seed glowing?”

“It looks to me like it’s sucking something out of Hiro,” Elma noted.

“Er, I don’t quite know what’s going on either,” Tinia admitted.

“Whoa. *Sucking*? What’s sucking what? Can you girls *not* freak me out mid-battle?” I was too busy piloting to spare attention for anything going on in the cockpit.

“Maybe the seed’s using Sir Hiro to power the ship.”

“Ew. Creepy,” I objected. “Is that even possible? This vessel is super high precision.”

“The seed is magic. I suppose anything’s possible,” Elma replied. “They say the holy empire uses magic—psionic technology, rather—to power ships.”

“Okay, but the *Krishna* doesn’t run that way! At least, not as far as I know. Maybe it’s an obscure feature we aren’t aware of.”

That feature hadn’t existed in *Stella Online*. Or rather, the game had hinted at

psionic powers, but no gameplay actually related to those. Still, there were elves and other beings here that hadn't existed in *SOL*. I couldn't say with certainty that magic wouldn't power the *Krishna*.

As I mulled this over, the pirates kept firing at me. Our shields really were attenuating at a snail's pace, though. In fact, they were so strong I decided to go on the offensive.

"The anti-aircraft cannons have been marked, Master Hiro."

"All right. Send our allies the data link. Time to join the attack!"

While the *Krishna* attracted enemy fire, our allies had managed to approach the base. As we swung around to join them, I was able to use the base itself as a shield, blocking the sightline from most of the pirates' anti-air turrets. It was time to shoot them to pieces one by one. Once we destroyed their ability to counterattack, the base was our punching bag. We could keep firing until it was demolished or send foot soldiers to seize it. It would be putty in our hands.

"If I had the only ship here, I'd have loved to fire a reactive torpedo," I mused.

"Do that now, and you'll be in big trouble," Elma warned.

That wouldn't just be stealing prey from other ships; the explosion would likely catch allies too. Naturally, I wouldn't be firing one.

"Too bad. We'll just have to attack them the old-fashioned way, one by one." I flew the *Krishna* close to the pirate base's surface, obliterating the anti-air weapons platforms in front of us with flak cannons and firing heavy lasers at those to our sides.

"This is s-so much more intimidating up close—eep!" Tinia yelped.

"It's less scary when you get used to it," Mimi assured her.

"Even if we crashed, our shields would hold." Elma shrugged. "It's fine."

"I wouldn't do anything as stupid as crashing," I objected.

Skimming the surface of a pirate base might feel like a roller coaster to the inexperienced, but between my piloting skills and the *Krishna*'s shields, it was way safer than any roller coaster. That said, we admittedly took occasional hits from anti-aircraft fire, and some friendly fire almost grazed us.

“Pirate ships have launched!” Mimi announced.

“Ooh, a bonus round. Time to make some cash!” *I, Captain Hiro, will stop at nothing to boost my kill score. Don’t expect me to hold back! Hmm? I’m immature? Psh! Who cares?*

Chapter 4:

Black-Box Security

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to eliminate the antiaircraft weaponry and aerial forces positioned outside the base, and Serena sent foot soldiers into the structure itself. The initial plan had been to destroy it, but she'd switched to conquering it on foot. Maybe she changed her mind because we'd neutralized its defenses so quickly.

Well, I guess it's not bad that we'll save more lives and resources by not destroying the base itself.

"I thought we were going to level it without a second thought," Mimi mused.

"Maybe the Empire's hoping base survivors will provide more thorough intel. I just hope the pirates don't snow them with false info," I replied, using recovery drones to salvage what was usable from the destroyed antiaircraft weaponry and pirate ships that'd greeted me.

"Would pirates be that clever?" Elma wondered.

"In a gang this size, one or two might be smart enough. Not that I'd know."

As for whether there were pirates loyal enough to sacrifice themselves rather than escape, I doubted it. Still, in a huge gang like this, you never knew. Serena had probably thought of these possibilities, of course; I didn't need to raise them.

Not that it would matter whether I warned Serena, assuming she has the power to pull intel directly from pirates' brains. Hm? That's inhumane? Well, in the Empire, pirates don't have human rights. And you tended to lose sympathy for them after seeing the poor captives they "processed." For instance, people who had "unnecessary" body parts removed and their organs toyed with until they were essentially turned into furniture, doing nothing but creating "useful" biological material and occasionally getting "used" by their owner. Just remembering that made me ill.

“I wonder if any of my elven brethren are inside,” Tinia said softly.

“No idea. Either way, better leave it to the Imperial Fleet.” If there were elves in there, I didn’t want to imagine what kind of “product” they’d be turned into. We couldn’t let Tinia see any of her people in that state, so I’d leave it all to the Empire. Tinia surely wouldn’t try to get a look inside.

As we pulled useful parts and the like out of the wreckage, the Imperial Fleet took the base. Our attack force was ordered back to Leafil Prime for the present. Looted ships would be stored in a temporary shipyard—really just an empty sector of space—near Leafil Prime. The Leafil System’s own military fleet would apparently stand guard to keep thieves—scavengers, rather—from touching our loot.

“I already ripped out the most valuable parts,” I muttered to myself. “Just in case.”

“Good call,” said Tina, tapping her tablet as she reviewed stripped ship parts we’d brought aboard. “Loot that ain’t airtight could deteriorate in outer space anyhow.”

We’d already docked the *Krishna* in the *Black Lotus*’s hangar. Elma and Mimi were looking after Tinia, who’d finally relaxed, although she was exhausted after her first battle. Me? I was used to fighting, so that little scuffle didn’t wear me out at all.

“Hull frame and plating aside,” said Wiska, busy tapping on her own tablet, “you mostly salvaged precision weapons. Those are much harder to repair if they deteriorate.”

As the twins worked, maintenance bots and drones zipped around the storage bay, transporting and scanning parts, occasionally repairing things as needed.

“How’s it all look? High-quality compared to the stuff we left outside, right?”

“Mm, pretty high,” Tina agreed. “I mean, they’re above-average grade and well maintained. For pirate stuff, anyway.”

“They’re nothing compared to mercenary or military equipment, though,” Wiska added.

“Here I thought Red Flag might use some *better* stuff,” said Tina. “Ain’t they captured tons of private ships and bodyguard equipment?”

“Funny, ain’t it?”

“Oh, I get what that means,” I blurted out. “The higher-ups typically get that gear before anyone else. Average Joe space pirates never see it.”

“Hunh. I’m wonderin’ about something else, though.” Tina set down her tablet and looked up at me. “How come there’re so many pirates? Ships ain’t cheap, and mercs and the military always hunt ’em down. It’s weird that they never just, y’know, get wiped out.”

“A lot are ex-colonists. Outlaws, people at the bottom of the lower class, and the like.”

There was little corruption in Grakkan politics, thanks to the involvement of machine intelligence, but there were still plenty of poor and disenfranchised people. Tarmein Prime, the first place in this universe I’d visited and the place where I’d met Mimi and Elma, contained slums inhabited by people like that. The people living there—forced to live there, rather—didn’t have bright futures. Once you fell to that level, it was hard to get back up. Such people gathered and committed misdeeds to earn what living they could. Becoming space pirates was a natural outcome.

“However much you struggle, you’re stuck down there,” I mused. “So they decide to be the thieves instead of the victims. Existing pirates realize that, so they feed those people money in return for information on colonies. And when they find someone they think will be useful, they pluck them out. Nobody cares if a criminal or an inhabitant of the slums disappears, after all.”

“Oh... Makes sense. Y’know, there were people like that where I used to live,” Tina recalled. “Folks who said they were in good with space pirates, and one day just disappeared.”

“I’d guess that they were recruited into piracy. Or maybe pirates tricked them and sold them into slavery.”

“Either sounds awful,” Wiska said sadly.

“Becoming pirates might be a relatively good outcome for them. As you know,

pirates capture ships and trick them out; their ships are basically glorified private ships, and everything they own was more or less free.”

Pirates made money off the cargo of ships they stole, then used those ships to plunder even more. Most of the parts they used for modifications and repairs probably came from plundered ships too. I’d heard that some prison colonies even worked in secret with pirates, faking criminals’ deaths and releasing them to pirate crews. In rare cases, people found out, and a facility’s corruption would be addressed.

“Anyway, that’s basically it,” I concluded. “Until we live in a utopia—or dystopia—that manages everyone perfectly and never leaves anyone out, pirates will always exist. Even if they’re temporarily exterminated, more will come along to occupy their territory. I’ll give you one thing, though—it’s almost uncanny how pirate numbers *never* seem to drop. Where are they coming from, I wonder?” They *couldn’t* spawn endlessly like video-game monsters, but there were so many that I almost believed that.

“It’s a deep-rooted problem, isn’t it?” Wiska mused.

“No kiddin’,” Tina agreed. “Oh, I got another question.”

“What now?”

“Does the *Krishna* have some kinda special shield system? We didn’t remember seein’ anything like that.”

“Is it hidden by the generator’s black-box security?” asked Wiska.

I cocked my head at their questions. As far as I knew, it didn’t have anything like that. Still, part of me guessed what they were asking about. “I don’t think so, but Elma said something weird in the middle of battle. The shields were apparently holding up really well or recharging extra fast. Did you get funky readings during the battle?”

“Forget ‘readings.’ We saw antiaircraft fire just bendin’ around ya!”

“Come again?” *Bending around us?*

“Just the laser fire, I think. But it seemed to swerve to avoid the *Krishna*,” Wiska explained. “Have you installed laser-deflection shields or something?”

"I have no idea what those are...This is freaking me out."

"Ya don't know yer own ship's defenses?!"

"Ow!" *Jeez, Tina, that complaint hurt. What'll you do if you split me in two?* "If I'd known about *that*, I would've used it before!"

"I... Yes, I suppose you're right," Wiska murmured.

"Mm. I wonder what it was," Tina sighed. "I bet it is related to the black-box security. But why'd it just start workin' earlier?"

"My only idea is that seed," I said. "It sucked something out of me during the battle, apparently."

"Sucked? Sucked what?"

"Don't ask me. Something related to psionic power, maybe."

"That'd mean the laser-refractin' shield was psionic tech," Tina noted. "Anythin' else?"

"Our generator output increased. According to Elma, anyway." She'd said something about the shields recharging faster too.



“Hmm...I see.” Wiska pondered that. “This is just a theory, but could the *Krishna* have tech that taps into your psionic abilities to improve its performance?”

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t know. I got the ship by chance, after all.”

“Where’d you get it, anyway?”

“That’s a really long story.” I’d scored it in a random high-difficulty quest in *Stella Online*. However, I doubted that telling the twins that I got the *Krishna* in a video game in another world would explain things at all. “At any rate, that was it—a coincidence. And when I came to this universe, it just showed up with me. I guess, knowing that background, you *could* call it kind of supernatural. Especially since I don’t even know how *I* got here.”

“When I think about it, you’re a whole ball of mysteries, hon. So...the *Krishna* looks like a regular spaceship at a glance, but underneath, it’s a vessel we can’t make heads or tails of.”

“In a way, it’s a font of unknown technology,” said Wiska. “How about we investigate it top to bottom again?”

“Sounds good to me. Mind if we check it out while we’re doin’ maintenance, hon?” Tina asked me.

“No, I don’t mind. Just don’t rip it apart. We need to be ready to launch at a moment’s notice.”

“Leave it to us!”

“Thank you very much.”

With that, the twins headed to the hangar where the *Krishna* was docked.

Unknown features, laser-deflecting shields... Were those really commonsense guesses? I mean, bending lasers that vaporized matter instantly were far from common sense already. But could we explain the new features from a strictly scientific perspective?

What else could they have been? Maybe...something negates fire the ship takes, so it looks like the laser shots bend? In that case, what the hell would that thing control? Probability? Fate? No. Maybe it simply twists space.

“Simply.” What would “simply” really mean? Now that was a philosophical question.

As I returned to the *Black Lotus* dining hall, a number of philosophical questions on my mind, I heard the crew clamoring over something.

Why are they flipping out? I wondered as I approached. “What the heck?”

Hearing my voice, Elma and Mimi turned with extremely troubled expressions.

“Oh. Hiro.”

“Master Hiro!”

“What’s going on?”

I quickly discerned the trouble: Tinia, who sat behind them. The elf stared forward with unfocused eyes. Her face was expressionless, as if she wore a Noh mask. She was gazing at the sacred tree seed, which emitted an unusual rainbow light. *What? Did she pull an SSR rate-up or something...? Sorry, Tinia. Maybe now isn’t the time for jokes.*

“Is that thing brainwashing her or what?” I demanded.

“Certainly not,” said Mimi. “This does seem to be a trance state, though. Like she’s undergoing mental interference.”

“So, the seed’s evil. Should I slice it in two?”

“Y-you can’t!” Mimi hurriedly grabbed my hand before I drew my sword.

Aw, come on. That thing is clearly cursed, and we can offer the elves any old excuse. We’ll pretend I didn’t cut it in half and burn it to a crisp with the Krishna’s lasers.

“Are *you* both brainwashed, too?” I demanded.

“No, we’re not.” Elma rolled her eyes. “Stop being paranoid. Why are you so spiteful toward the seed, anyway?”

“Why should I mollycoddle it? It’s been nothing but a problem. Well...to be fair, I guess it might’ve awakened my psionic powers. Not that I feel different.”

Still, aside from those powers, the seed had just given the elves reason to push trouble on me. But I would've been happy to let Tinia aboard with or without the seed. "What matters is Tinia. Is she okay?"

"G-good question... We were wondering what to do. Try to jostle her awake?"

"What to do..." mulled it over. "I don't think the seed has reason to *hurt* Tinia. Still, it could permanently screw her up without meaning to."

"You have no faith," Elma sighed. "Remember, the seed is venerated on Theta."

"Well, back in my world, getting involved with deities and supernatural beings always goes haywire."

Worse, this thing was like a Thetan sword in the stone, choosing a hero who'd supposedly be glorious, yet destructive. I didn't believe silly superstitions like that, but you couldn't take prophecies *too* lightly.

While we freaked out, the seed's light settled down, and Tinia's eyes refocused.

"Hm...?" Tinia looked around. "What's the matter, everyone?"

"We should ask *you* that. What'd that seed do to you? Want me to destroy it? 'Cause I will." Seizing the seed, which had finally knocked off the rainbow glowing, I peered into Tinia's face. She was back to normal, thank goodness. Looking at her before had been disturbing.

Tinia blushed. "Huh? Er...y-you're a little close."

"My bad."

I backed away. Tinia put her hands on her red cheeks, heaving a sigh of relief.

Hey, I'm sorry. I was just a little worried. "Anyway, I want to talk about the frankly suspicious and evil mental interference this thing was just up to. What say we eject it from the ship in the general direction of Leafil IV? It seems sturdy enough. I'm sure it could withstand the vacuum, radiation, and subzero temperature, plus the adiabatic compression when it entered the atmosphere."

In my hands, the sacred tree seed flashed furiously in protest.

“I’m sure you’d love to trash-talk me, but this is my ship,” I told it. “All the people aboard are my crew, and it falls to me to protect them. If you want to act like *you* call the shots, I’ll throw you out into space on my authority as captain. Sacred tree seed, elven object of worship—I don’t care about any of that. How about I just cut you in two right now, huh?”

Even when I squeezed the seed as hard as I could, it didn’t react. Still, maybe it could tell I was serious; it flickered much more gently.

“Ready to behave yourself?” I demanded.

The sacred tree seed flashed twice, seemingly agreeing, since I’d told it to flash twice for yes and once for no.

“Next time you do something like this, you won’t get off so easy. Got it?”

It flashed twice more.

Since it was cooperating, I could potentially forgive and forget for now.

“What’d this thing actually do to you, Tinia?” I asked her. “Depending what it was, I might just send it back to Leafil IV by direct flight through outer space anyway.”

“Please don’t,” said Tinia. “That would cause us both trouble. Um, as for what you just saw, it was an exchange regarding...a new type of magic, I suppose.”

We collectively raised our eyebrows at her unhelpful explanation.

“The sacred seed evidently resonated with your ship, the *Krishna*. The seed successfully awakened to a new use—or new *kind*—of magic,” Tinia continued. “It linked to my mind and mana to solidify and experiment with that discovery.”

“What do you mean, *resonated* with the *Krishna*?” This was getting far-fetched, but it was true that the *Krishna*’s black-box security had for some reason activated and given the ship great new features. If this so-called resonance caused that, it certainly explained the timing. “You’re saying that, when the seed resonated with the *Krishna*, it learned about some of its features and came up with new magic? Then used you to experiment with that magic?”

“Um, more or less. It didn’t use the magic, though. The sacred tree seed can store vast quantities of mana, but it’s less adept at...well, delicate magical

operations. Thus, I lent it my body.”

“Lent it your body? Was that safe?”

“I don’t feel off. Rather, I’d say I feel better than ever.”

“Even if you worship that seed, you shouldn’t let something take over your body,” I warned her. “You never know what terrible things might happen while you’re not in control.”

“What do you mean?”

“It might knock you up with a child you never asked for.” That *was* weirdly common in mythology, especially Greek mythology. Zeus loved to go around impregnating random women, which infuriated his goddess wife to no end.

“Huh? *What?!?*” Tinia blushed hotly upon hearing my rationale; jumping out of her seat, she scooted away from the seed. It flashed brightly as if insisting on its innocence.

Still, I didn’t trust that thing farther than I could throw it. “Anyway, that was just an example. But that’s what it means to surrender your body, you know? You give something else the power to decide whether you live or die.”

“B-but I was chosen as the seed’s maiden. It’s my duty to meet its demands.”

“Duty, huh...? Guess you can’t help it, then,” I yielded.

“Wow. The word ‘duty’ made you give up that easily?” Elma asked, surprised.

“I totally oppose Tinia entrusting her body or safety to that sketchy seed. But if she thinks she has a duty to risk it, there’s nothing I can say...*except* that I still totally oppose it.”

I repeated myself for emphasis, but freedom of religion *was* important. I couldn’t *force* Tinia to do anything. That damn seed flashed like it was mad as hell, though. I got the feeling it was demanding an apology and compensation.

“All right, fine, sorry for hurting your feelings and maligning you,” I told it. “I’ll take it back...*if*, and only if, you can tell me outright that you’ve *never* entertained yourself by using a ‘divine revelation’ to require a man and woman who didn’t like each other to get married.”

The seed's flashing abruptly weakened.

I knew you'd do something like that, you little freak. "There you have it. Don't drop your guard too much. This thing would start a war for kicks."

"Um...I'll be mindful."

"Master Hiro, how can you predict that?"

"Based on knowledge and experience." I wouldn't admit it to Mimi, but if I'd been that seed, I'd totally have done that same thing with a big, fertilizer-eating grin. Maybe the seed rubbed me the wrong way because we were too much alike. No. Surely not. *Probably* not.

While I mulled this over, Mei's voice came through the speaker. "Master, Lieutenant Colonel Serena has invited you to dinner."

"Uh...tell her I'll accept if it's casual. No dress code or anything." I didn't feel like changing into stuffy formal clothes just for dinner.

"Understood." Mei hung up.

"You going alone?" Elma asked.

"No way. Come with me. You too, Mimi and Tinia."

"Okay!"

"Me as well?" Tinia asked.

"From a political standpoint, that's the best move for an elf. Or rather, for an elf in your position." If Tinia joined the revenge effort on behalf of her people *and* dined with the Imperial Fleet commander afterward, that would surely have political benefits.

Tinia didn't seem convinced that she deserved my invitation. "All I did was sit in your ship. I didn't help in battle."

"Going onto the battlefield and coming out alive was enough of an accomplishment. And, whether you meant to or not, you defended the *Krishna*."

I glanced at the sacred tree seed. Tinia hadn't known this would happen, but there was no doubt that the seed interfered in the *Krishna*'s black-box security,

catalyzing unprecedented abilities. That contributed to our victory, at least somewhat, so saying that Tinia had helped us fight was no overstatement.

“Serena might ask us about that later,” I added. “Let’s get our story straight now.”

“Get our story straight?”

“I don’t want to publicize the *Krishna*’s special new features. You have an extremely rare item with powerful magic; let’s use that to our advantage.”

The sacred tree seed shone brightly.

“Thanks a lot for inviting us this evening,” I greeted Serena.

“Don’t mention it. You minimized damage to our allies today; this is merely a gesture of hospitality in return. Please, sit.”

I obediently took the seat I was offered.

We were in the captain’s dining hall aboard the battleship *Lestarius*, the Pirate-Hunting Unit’s flagship. More precisely, this dining hall was used by the captain and highest-ranking officers, including the first mate, artillery commander, radio officer, and several administrators. Serena had explained all those details to me one time, for some reason.

As she watched her soldiers bring the food in, Serena explained today’s feast. “These dishes are made with fresh meat and vegetables from Leafil IV. However, they were prepared with an automatic cooker, rather than by a chef. This is the best that I can provide, but it may seem lackluster to those staying on Leafil IV.”

“We appreciate it nonetheless.” I bowed slightly.

The lieutenant colonel glanced at my entourage, waited for her men to leave the dining hall, and then murmured, “Another addition?”

“Can you not act as though I have more girls with me every time we meet?”

“Isn’t that exactly the case?” Serena asked, gaze settling on Tinia.

I hated when she put it like that...since it was true. “Hey, *she*’s not a crew

member. This is Tinia, from Leafil IV. She happens to be accompanying us due to unavoidable circumstances. She's, uh...a big shot's daughter."

"Excuse me, Sir Hiro. I don't know if that's the right way to introduce me to the marquis's daughter."

"Not even Imperial nobility supersedes the authority of tribal leadership. Especially as the Leafil System is a...special place politically. So please don't mind me." Serena assured Tinia. "But, Captain Hiro, don't you think that introduction of this young lady was rather lacking in delicacy?"

"You ought to know better than to expect delicacy from me," I protested. Serena and I had agreed in advance that this would be a casual, unofficial dinner. In other words, we'd eat together as equals, and since there were no prying eyes, I'd relaxed into my usual merc mode.

"I can explain the situation, if you'd prefer," Elma told Serena.

"That sounds lovely. Let's discuss it over dinner. Knowing your group, I'm sure the story will be interesting."

"I hate that I can't refute that," I mumbled.

As I wallowed in defeat, Elma practically launched into a slapstick comedy routine on our recent doings, then told Serena about Tinia's circumstances. I piped up occasionally between bites of the delicious Imperial-style dinner.

Once our discussion of Tinia and Leafil IV had petered out, Serena asked, "By the way, that ship of yours... The *Krishna*, was it? Did you add some sort of unusual upgrade?"

Here it comes, I thought, preparing to launch into the cover story we'd come up with. "Oh, yeah—how come those lasers bent around the ship, you mean? I didn't know about that until I got back to the *Black Lotus*, so I'm not sure what triggered it. Remember that sacred seed thing we mentioned, though? It started glowing mid-battle, so we think it's got some psionic power. The elves worship the seed, and supposedly it's the only one of its kind, so me and our mechanics don't think there's any way to harness that ability."

"...I see. That does make sense. You explained awfully *glibly*, though..."

I'd expected Serena to keep prying, so I brushed her off readily, shrugging. "Well, press me all you want, but you're not getting anything more out of me. Even we don't understand, I swear; we don't even know if we're right about the seed. We're just spitballing based on the circumstances. Our mechanics don't know anything about psionic technology either."

I really didn't know how well lies would work on someone with enhanced senses, but what I'd said was mostly true. I'd just omitted the part about the *Krishna's* black-box security and pinned everything on the seed. I wasn't being totally dishonest, so I doubted she'd see through the fabricated portion.

Serena pouted. "I'll never get you to like me, will I?"

"Where'd that come from? You're weirding me out." *And what was that about "getting me" to like you? I'm not your pet.*

"See how rude he is to me, Tinia? This is the way it usually goes. He turns on the charm, but when I try to get closer to him, he runs away."

"Er...yes," Tinia replied halfheartedly, looking uncomfortable.

Hey, cut that out. No wrapping poor, serious Tinia up in your weirdness.

"You're hiding something, aren't you?" Serena narrowed her eyes at me.

I returned the favor. "You can think what you want." I really didn't have anything against Serena, but getting along with her too well was risky. She was a lieutenant colonel of the Imperial Fleet and Marquis Holz's daughter; that high position made her dangerous.

"However hard I try to befriend you, it always comes to this," Serena complained. "Oh, what's the point...?"

"Okay, now you're just guilt-tripping me. I'm grateful to you, and I care more about you than a friend. If something happened and the military or aristocracy chased you out, I'd personally drag you aboard my ship before I'd let you die some pointless death."

"Huh...? What is this? A proposal?"

"Are you for real?" I groaned. *I mean, I guess interpreting it that way isn't that weird—not that that's how I meant it. It's just, if it weren't for Serena's rank, I'd*

gladly let her aboard my ship... Hunh. Yeah, depending on how you interpret that, “proposal” could be a pretty normal takeaway.

“What do you two think?” Serena asked the girls.

“I don’t blame you for thinking he was asking you aboard.”

“Well, yes... That’s the kind of person Master Hiro is.”

I expected Elma to bust my chops, but Mimi’s reply stung. *What do you mean, that’s the kind of person I am? What kind of appraisal is that?*

“Is this how you seduce women?” Serena demanded. “Tinia, you’d better watch yourself around him.”

“Er...yes. I’ll do that.”

“Can’t anyone say anything nice about me?” I couldn’t take back what I’d said, and further protest would just make things worse. All I could do was shut my mouth.

“If you’re so fond of me,” said Serena, “you could always join my fleet.”

“No way.”

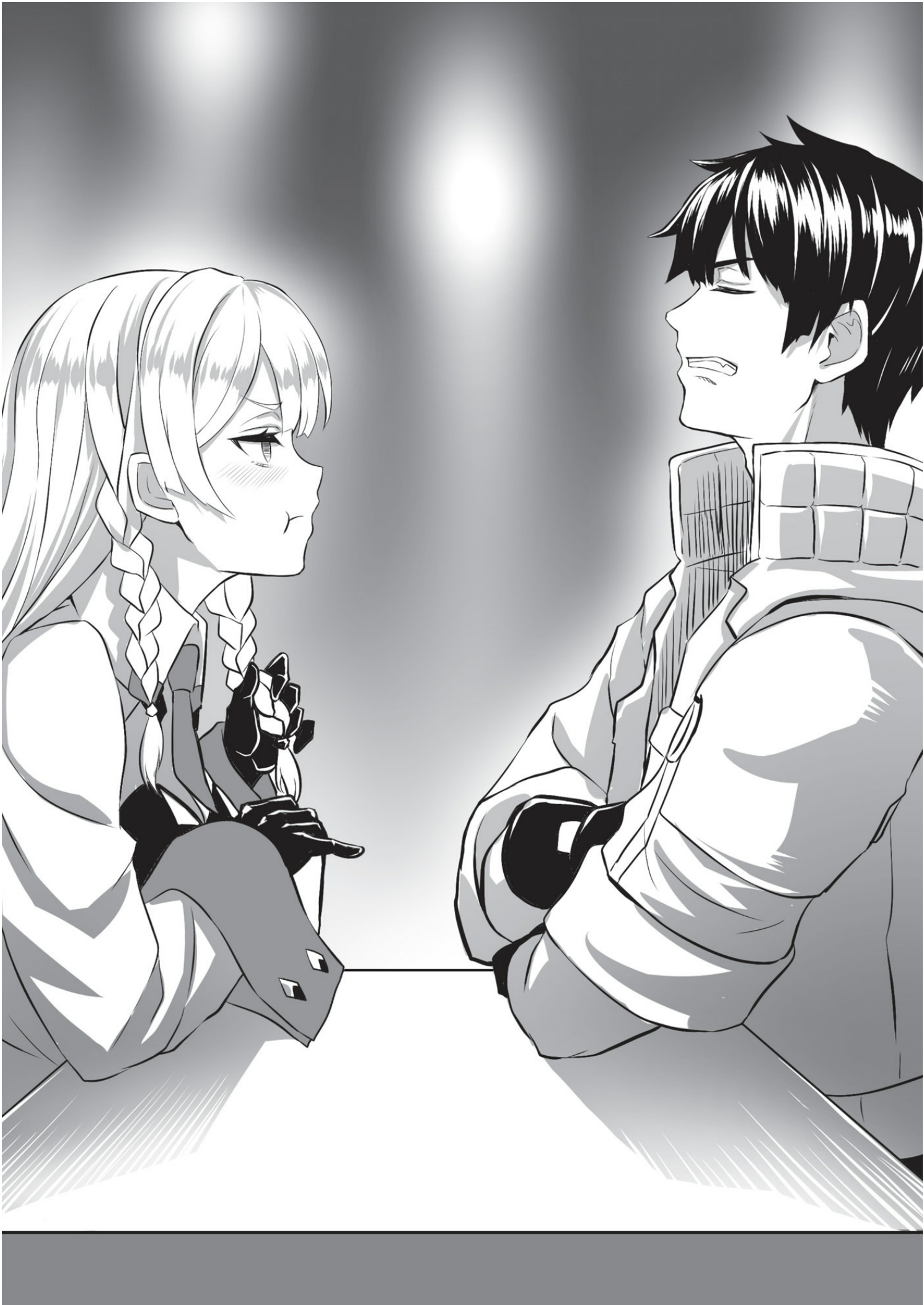
“Why not?!”

“Pay’s too low.”

Tipsy, embarrassed, or both, Serena raised her voice. “Well...I suppose that’s that, then!”

I didn’t have military training, so if I *did* become her subordinate, I couldn’t hope to serve as much more than a bodyguard—or cannon fodder. Not that it mattered, because enlisting was out of the question—like I’d said, the pay was too low.

Still, the notion of military training got me thinking. As long as I was stuck working with the Imperial Fleet, I figured I ought to see whether I could get some Imperial training on stuff like tactics.



Mei could look into that when we got back to the ship, I thought to myself, as I was forced to console the annoying lieutenant commander.

Chapter 5:

A Busy Yet Sweet Moment

THE DINNER ENDED SAFELY—at the price of some of my credibility and dignity—and we returned to the *Black Lotus*.

The Imperial Fleet would take a while to prepare and reassemble its forces. There had been few casualties, but the Empire moved as slowly as any big bureaucracy. After all, the sheer scale of their supply chain was far greater than what we had to manage. One mistake could lead to dozens or even hundreds of starving, sick, or injured people; the Empire had to take that seriously.

“What’s caught your attention so soon after getting back?” Elma asked me.

“A write-up on the pirate-base raid. I had Mei collect reports on past Imperial Fleet raids on pirate bases too, as well as on other stationary targets.”

“What was the point of that?” Elma watched with equal parts exasperation and concern as I sat at the dining hall table, reading the reports.

Don’t look at me like that. Rude. “Just don’t want to be ignorant. I had Mei get some Imperial Fleet strategy books too.”

“Wow. This is sudden.”

“While we talked with Serena, I got to thinking. I figure, if we’re going to work with the Imperial Fleet in future, I’ll need to know this stuff to a degree.”

“You’re weirdly serious sometimes.” Elma sat across from me and sipped her drink.

Before long, the twins appeared. They’d stayed on the ship to work while we were at dinner, since they hadn’t had any reason to go see Serena.

“Hoo boy... Hey! Elma’s drinkin’!”

“Lucky her.”

Elma shook the bottle, offering, “My treat. You’re done for the day, right?”

The twins' faces lit up.

"Aw, yeah! You get us!"

"We'll take a quick shower first."

The two gleefully ran off to the shower. *Do they go in together? They'd both fit, I guess. I can usually get in with Mimi or Elma, although it's a little cramped,* I thought as I watched them leave.

Simultaneously, Mimi and Tinia took the twins' places in the dining hall. Had they showered together, too? They *were* getting chummy.

"What are you reading?" Mimi asked me.

"Today's battle reports and stuff. I'm thinking of studying Imperial Fleet strategy."

"Are you planning to enlist?"

"Absolutely not. Just prepping to work with them."

"I see. May I read with you?"

"Sure. So far, I've just skimmed the report."

Mimi sat next to me, leaned in, and looked at the tablet in my hands. She smelled nice, probably because she'd just showered. Her body heat, palpable through her thin pajamas, was oddly relaxing.

"Oh, right," said Elma. "Tinia, I want to discuss something with you. At length."

"What is it?"

"We'll be back in a bit. Hiro, I'm leaving the booze here. When the twins get back, tell them they can have all they want."

"Gotcha," I replied.

With a wink, Elma steered Tinia out of the dining hall.

Oh, I get it. Elma's being considerate. I showered with her in the Krishna before, and I think she said something about letting Mimi have me next time.

"She's being thoughtful, isn't she?" Mimi said.

“Yeah. I don’t think she needs to bend over backward like that, though.”
Elma’s so good-hearted. Next time I find nice liquor, I’ll grab it for her. I won’t know the difference, but I can just ask an employee or something.

While Mimi and I read the report, cuddling, Tina returned to the dining hall. Wiska tiptoed in behind her, still damp from the shower.

“Oh! They’re flirting!”

“Nice, huh?” I chuckled. “Wait a second. Aren’t those my shirts?”

“We wanted to wash our jumpsuits after our bath, and they were right there. We thought we’d borrow ’em, y’know?”

“S-sorry... We’ll wash and return them!” Wiska stammered, blushing and nervous.

“I mean, it’s fine.” I shook my head at the twins. *Those T-shirts are so big on them, they look more like dresses. Fun sight, even if it looks a little sketchy. The girls are cute, and... Wait. They’re washing their jumpsuits?* “Say, what’re you wearing under those?”

“Nothin’. Like I said, our stuff’s in the wash.”

“Okay, *that’s* a little much.”

Now I understood why Wiska was acting suspicious. When I glanced at her, she gripped the T-shirt’s hem and looked down. *Yeah. If you’re embarrassed, don’t indulge your sister’s excuses. And can you not pull on my shirt? Your strength will stretch it.*

“Look—we’re stark naked under these! Ya gotta be into that, right, hon?” Tina flapped the shirt hem, spinning around. *Man, she might be short, but she’s got plump, shapely thighs and hips.*

“Um...I’m not sure how high up I should look...”

“Huh? Y-ya mean—?!”

“If you’re going to act embarrassed, then don’t do it!” *Don’t blush at me!* I didn’t dislike Tina or Wiska, and I essentially recognized that they were mature women. “Elma said the booze is all yours, by the way.”

“M-mgh... I see you changing the subject.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Drink and calm down. You too, Wiska,” I urged.

“Er, all right...”

The twins sat down and started making their way through the bottle.

“Hey, Mimi,” Tina pestered. “Why do ya think he won’t resign himself to showin’ us a good time?”

“Master Hiro’s too nice. And dwarves are a little, um, small compared to us humans. I think he worries a bit.”

“That’s enough dirty talk.” I knew girls went all over smutty details when they were alone together, but *hearing* them dissect me was a little much. To be fair, I *was* worried about what Mimi said. The size difference between me and the dwarves creeped me out.

“It’s fine. Who cares?” Tina objected. “Human and dwarves have the same size junk.”

“Girls shouldn’t call it ‘junk.’” Her blunt delivery made me cringe. *I appreciate your silence, Wiska, but your expression tells me you feel the same way.* “How come you keep hounding me to... Okay, it’d be rude to say out loud... But why bring it up again now?”

“Ya know what they say. No time like the present.”

Wiska spoke up. “Patience hasn’t gotten us anywhere. At this rate, Tinia will get ahead of us.”

“Get ahead of you...?” It’d be easy to tell them to stop rushing things and lowering themselves. On the other hand, now that they’d put themselves out there like this, it’d be downright wussy to balk again. “Okay. If you’re willing to go this far, I’ll get ready. You sure, though?”

“N-now that you’re really askin’... Hey, Wis! *Wis!*”

“D-don’t put me on the spot...”

The twins blushed and turned sheepish.

Hmm... Something about this is oddly arousing. “Heck, how do you feel about

this, Mimi?” I asked.

“I’m fine with it. In fact, I like the idea! Tina and Wiska will finally be part of our family, right?”

“‘Family,’ huh? Does that make our fleet the Hiro Family or something? The mothership is the *Black Lotus*, so maybe we’re the *Black Lotus* Family or *Black Lotus* Clan...”

“Hate to say it, but I think ‘*Black Lotus*’ sounds better than your name, hon,” Tina weighed in.

“Yeah, naming my crew after myself seems a little weird anyway.”

Tina and I laughed. Wiska tugged Tina’s shirt—*my* T-shirt, that is—and whispered in her ear, blushing and shooting glances at me meanwhile.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Ah, um, er... She’s askin’ whether we should go to your room or ours.”

“Damn, the direct approach!”

Wiska, teary-eyed, started smacking her sister in protest.

What kind of reaction is that? Cut that out right now. You could beat her to a pulp at this rate.

“Guess Wiska just can’t wait,” I declared, “So—ow! Ow! Okay! Damn, sorry! Calm down!”

Wiska had turned her storm of punches on me. She might’ve been holding back her superhuman strength; still, it hurt like hell. That left me with no choice but to neutralize her attack by picking her up. It was cute how she froze as soon as I pulled her into my arms.

“Aw, lucky Wis,” said Tina. “I want in!”

“I’ll do my best.”

Lifting them both was surprisingly difficult. Dwarves are heavier than they look. I figured I could at least reach my room, though.

I looked back at Mimi and hesitated. “Uh...suddenly I feel guilty.”

“Don’t worry about me.” She smiled. “You can always make it up next time!”

“Okay. Hold me to that.” I nodded to Mimi, then went to carry Tina and Wiska off to my room—no, to *their* room.

“We’re gonna need a few things,” Tina said.

“I won’t ask for details.”

“Much appreciated,” Wiska replied.

Time to steel myself. I’d made my choice.

The next morning, I picked up the sisters—who were struggling to stand on their own, let alone walk—and carried them to the bathroom, where the three of us took a welcome bath together. Bathing with Mimi, Elma, or Mei was cramped, but the two tiny mechanics and I fit in the tub just fine.

“You look like you’re havin’ fun, hon.”

“Of course I am. This is great.” It *looked* indecent, but once I got used to it—accepted it, rather—it wasn’t bad. They were really cute, after all. I sank into the hot water, rubbing Wiska’s abdomen while she sat in my lap.

“Wis! Don’t tell me you’re gonna start blushin’ now!”

“H-he keeps rubbing my belly,” she protested in a rather enticing voice.

“It’s so soft and smooth.”

“That’s enough, hon. Are you trying to start this all over again or what?”

“Sometimes I do that.” When I bathed with Mimi, Elma, or Mei the morning after, we’d often start a second round. “I’m not up to it yet after last night, though. Not enough of a monster.”

“I’ll believe that when you put that hand away, hon. Want me to remind ya what ya did to me last night?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not touching anything sensitive, am I? As for last night...I just went with the flow, you know?”

“Seemed to me you treated the two of us different.”

“Are you saying you want me to do what I did to Wiska to *you*?”

“I-I’m not...*not* sayin’ that...” This time, it was Tina who blushed and got evasive.

What’s got her in such a cute mood?

“Ah!” Wiska, who’d been fidgeting in my lap, gasped as if she’d noticed something.

Whoa. Wiska, it’s not what you think. I mean, yeah, it is, but that’s natural when you’re moving around so much on my lap.

Noticing Wiska’s reaction, Tina grinned provocatively, still blushing. “You might’ve gotten the better of us last night, hon, but it’s our turn next time, got it?”

“Pssh! Bring it on. I’ll show you the difference experience makes.”

“We’ll make ya eat those words!”

The flirtation continued endlessly.

After a very relaxed bath, I tossed Tina and Wiska onto my bed and went to the dining hall.

Elma greeted me with a stern look. “Well?” she demanded. “Where are the twins?”

Don’t look at me like that. It’ll make me shy. “They’re taking the day off.”

The military force would have regrouped today or tomorrow, but we wouldn’t necessarily launch immediately after. The entire force had to move to the next star system first, which would be a lot of effort. Of course, the Empire probably had an attack plan ready, and they’d be setting things up at our destination as well, so it might not end up taking as long as I expected.

Unfortunately, troops naturally moved slowly compared to free individual mercs like me. Gathering a large force was pointless if you didn’t use your troops in sync, though. For instance, a hundred people wouldn’t really possess “strength in numbers” if each just charged alone whenever they chose.

At any rate, it didn't matter if the twins were out of commission for a day or two.

"The day off?" Overhearing my statement, Tinia blushed and suddenly started polishing the seed of the sacred tree with some kind of dish towel. The seed was flickering contentedly; apparently that felt good. *A seed...happy to be polished? Is that thing actually a seed?*

"Someone's enjoying their time off," Elma chuckled.

"Variety is the spice of life."

"Does that mean we've got the day off, too?" Mimi asked.

"Sure. But I'd like to spend it with you two."

"I'm next, okay?"

"I haven't forgotten our promise."

That reply earned a broad smile from Mimi. "I can't wait," she laughed.

Seeing that, Elma looked at me as if saying, *What about me?*

I nodded back. "I'll find all the time I can. Sorry to make you girls do all the scheduling, but try to share me fairly, okay? We have two more in the fold now." I'd done my best not to get carried away, but at this point, I was one of those guys with a harem on his hands. Maybe that suited a mercenary in this universe, but it felt like I'd crossed a line.

"Okay. We'll figure it out. It might be a good idea to let Mei manage our schedule," Elma proposed.

"Yeah! I'd be happy to leave it in her hands," Mimi agreed. They seemed to place an unusual amount of trust in Mei. What in the world had they gotten into out of earshot? *Actually, maybe I'm better off not knowing. Feels like I might get hurt prying into things I shouldn't.*



“So what’s the plan for today?”

“We stand by until we receive orders,” I answered. “Let’s be ready to act at a moment’s notice. Although I doubt we’ll have anything to do this early.”

“A force this size should take a while to organize, after all,” said Elma.

“In that case, this really *could* be a free day,” noted Mimi. “Then again, I bet Serena can get things moving in no time.”

“Think so? Maybe you’re right,” I agreed. Serena was a cunning woman. She’d climbed the ranks so quickly, and at such a young age. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d already plotted a course to exterminate the pirates in the systems beyond. “Either way, all we can do is wait. No launching on our own for fun.”

“Fair enough. Well, I’ll let the twins have you today. Take care of them.”

“Please do! We’ll call you if you need anything. Take your time and have fun!”

“Don’t know why you put it like that, but okay...I’ll take you up on that and make sure they’re seen to.”

The twins hadn’t had breakfast, so they were surely starving. Since I’d once again immobilized them, taking care of them fell to me.

What’s that? You don’t think we should have chilled out when we’d just been scuffling with pirates? Look, we needed to make every day count *because* of the danger. A peaceful, fulfilling life is important to a healthy mentality.

At any rate, Tinia continued wiping that seed, all the while blushing and muttering, “Take care of them... Take *care* of them?”

Maybe the conversation was too much for the poor, innocent elf.

I brought the exhausted twins breakfast and did my best to pamper them. Lying in my bed, we looked at ship catalogs, discussed engineering, relaxed, dozed off together, and enjoyed a truly sublime day off. The Imperial Fleet moved faster than I expected, though. Before long, we received orders to ship out to our next destination.

“You work too much, hon,” Tina complained.

“There’s nothing we can do about it, Sis.” Wiska turned to me. “You sure it’s okay for us to rest here?”

“You’re done maintaining the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*, right? There’s hardly anything for you to handle right now, then.”

The twins had worked themselves to the bone finishing maintenance while we ate dinner with Serena yesterday. It sounded like there was still work left—sorting salvage from the pirates’ base and ships, restoring things, and the like—but that wasn’t urgent.

Of course, since Mei was plotting our route, there wasn’t much for me to do either. We just had to follow Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit to the next battlefield. If her forces were working this quickly, we might leap into battle the moment we reached our target system. Once we entered the hyperlane, I wanted to be in the *Krishna* and ready to fight.

“We’ve got our tablets cued up,” Tina declared. “We can recover loot and operate bots and drones as needed. Even in bed, we’ve got plenty to do, so don’t you worry about us. Leave it all to Tina!”

“And me too. Be careful out there.” Wiska hugged me and kissed my cheek. I returned the favor.

“Aw, no fair! I want a peck, too!”

“Okay, okay. Thanks, Tina.” Laughing at her complaints, I gave her a hug and a kiss. This kind of emotional parting would be a death flag in a manga or anime, but it was a little late to worry about that. All I could do was strive not to die.

After we received the order to travel, the fleet split into star system blockade units and offensive units, then moved out. When we arrived at the Sinoskia System neighboring the Leafil System, we’d join the attacking force and make a beeline for the pirate base.

“Wonder how this one will go,” said Mimi.

“No idea, but I doubt they’ll put up much of a fight.”

“You don’t think so?” she cocked her head. “By now, they’ll know what happened in the Leafil System. They might be ready and waiting.”

“Me, I think they’ll have abandoned the bases. What do you think, Elma?” I looked at her.

“Hmm,” she mumbled to herself, thinking for a moment. “I doubt the system will be entirely abandoned, but I do think their resistance will be lower.”

“You two agree?” asked Mimi.

“Red Flag is big for a pirate gang,” I explained, “but they’re not big enough to hold their own against a full military. If they know we’re on our way to fight them, they’ll scramble to pick up whatever assets they can and scam.”

“I see. Then this’ll be another easy win?”

“I didn’t say that,” I refuted her. “If I were a pirate, I’d do something nasty.”

“Nasty? Like what?” Mimi tilted her head again. Tinia, who’d listened silently up to this point, looked interested too.

I figured pirates did have brains, small though they might be. If they knew the enemy was going to knock down their doors, they’d pull little tricks. “They might make their base self-destruct when the army enters,” I mused. “Or plant tons of land mines on our route. Maybe not in a star system this close, though.”

“Good point,” Elma agreed. “Even if they came up with quick plans, they wouldn’t have the personnel or resources to do anything like that. They’ll only be able to harass us with what’s immediately available.”

“What’s immediately available...?” Mimi repeated.

“Pirate bases are always stocked with illegal goods, Mimi,” I said. “Some of them dangerous.”

“Oh. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“If they have anything as rare as a Singing Crystal, I’ll be surprised, but there’s no telling what we could fly into.”

I pitied the infiltration team. Just from *Stella Online*, I knew about far too many threats to list, and it was very possible there were worse ones I had no

inkling of. Standard chemical and biological weapons were one thing, but this universe was full of things far worse than those.

If you're wondering what kinds of "things far worse" were out there, here's an example. There were energy-based life-forms that attached themselves to the corpses of humans and other intelligent life, modified them grotesquely, then used them to multiply rapidly. What movie zombies do, basically—you'd call those pretty bad, wouldn't you? *Stella Online* had probably introduced the "zombies" as an homage to a famous video game, but players had given up fighting the incredibly hard-to-kill enemies face to face. They ultimately just obliterated the large mining ship the zombies took over.

Other examples were highly lethal space spiders, killer aliens with bodily fluids that dissolved spaceship hulls... Oh, and real zombies too, although those were easy to waste with lasers and power armor.

"Biological weapons are a given," said Elma. "Worst-case scenario, they might've booby-trapped victims."

"Victims?"

"Pirates sometimes set traps *in* people they 'processed.' Bombs, poison gas, possibly worse. You save them, and then boom." Elma opened her fist wide, simulating an explosion.

"That's horrible." Tinia's pretty brow knitted in disgust.

"Dirty as hell, isn't it?" You couldn't expect rationality or ethics from pirates; nothing was too evil for them, which was why we killed them on sight.

"My heart goes out to the soldiers."

"Yeah," I agreed. "That's why, no matter what Serena says, I'll never enlist."

Pirate ships were nasty enough, but you never knew what the hell you'd witness in their bases. Usually, you only came across biological weapons; still, I'd never want to charge into one.

About two hours later, the cockpit's main screen showed awesome firepower blowing away a pirate base.

"Talk about bloody fireworks."

“More or less what we expected.”

“Wow...”

The space-combat portion of the raid had gone exactly as expected. It ended quickly. Red Flag withdrew almost all its ships, leaving us to deal with little more than the automatically controlled turrets on the base itself. They had no real way to counterattack, so there was no opportunity for us small and medium ships to act. Cannon fire from large ships took care of almost the entire job.

The problem was, after the Imperial soldiers charged into the base, they quickly found biological weapons seemingly made from mutated humans and other races. Those “weapons” defended the entrance for an hour while the fleet analyzed the situation. In the end, Serena opted to withdraw and destroy the base with long-range artillery fire. There was no obvious benefit to seizing it, so she reasoned that there was no point losing soldiers.

To be fair, if the pirates had enough time to booby-trap the base, they’d almost certainly destroyed any data, or taken it with them. To my mind, Serena made the right choice.

That led to the stationary-target shooting practice unfolding before us. The fleet subjected the pirates’ asteroid base to dazzling large-bore laser cannon fire until it blew up, which made for one spectacular sight.

“Whoa. That was loud,” I muttered. “Wonder whether oxygen, fuel, or ammo set it off.”

“Was demolishing the base a good idea?” asked Mimi. “That might spread whatever they were cultivating inside.”

“You think there are biological weapons that could remain infectious after taking laser fire and being scattered in the vacuum of space?” Elma retorted.

“I don’t know,” I chimed in. “But if there are, shields would probably keep them from attaching to passing spaceships. They’d disintegrate the second they touched a cruiser’s shield.”

“I guess you’re right,” Mimi admitted.

A shield on a basic security setting—the kind you put up while docking at a

colony or landing on a planet—could only cause numbness or burns. Shields on a deep-space setting, on the other hand, were nothing to sneeze at. Only spacefaring creatures like crystal life-forms might survive those. Oh—and an android like Mei might, although the shields would strip away her clothes and exterior, the parts that identified her as Mei.

“Not much profit today, though, huh?” I sighed.

“We barely faced any pirate ships at all,” Mimi agreed, “so we couldn’t earn any bounties or kill bonuses.”

“We get paid for our time stuck here as an escort, though.” Elma shrugged. “Free income to kick back and relax isn’t bad, is it?”

“I guess not...”

While we chatted over the sight of the exploding pirate base, Tinia hesitantly spoke up. “Er, shouldn’t we help?”

“The *Krishna*’s heavy laser cannons aren’t much good in large-scale bombardments like this. The *Black Lotus*’s EML might be effective, but ammo isn’t free. And it’s not like we’d get a bonus for helping.”

“In other words, you aren’t helping because you wouldn’t get paid?”

“That’s how it works. We’re mercenaries.” Leave fighting for honor and glory to old heroes and knights. We mercenaries fought for cash in hand, and soldiers like Serena fought for their national interest. Then again, I’m sure honor and glory *were* important to military nobles like Serena.

“So you value profit over fame, and avoid crossing the line between them.”

“You got it. Only a crazy idiot would run in alone and risk his neck unnecessarily... Oh.” *Now that I think about it, I did exactly that against the Belbellum Federation and crystal life-forms.* “I’m being hypocritical, huh?”

“You sure are,” Elma chuckled.

“Yeah.” Mimi grinned wryly.

“Hiro tries to act tough and callous, but he’s a softie at heart,” Elma told Tinia.

“He’s holding back now because there’s no good reason to go in. But if he

knows he's the only one who can help someone, or fix a problem, he'll charge in even if it seems reckless."

"Nuh-uh. Not true at all." Elma and Mimi kept muttering away, so I quickly changed the subject. All their praise made me uncomfortable. "Instead of talking nonsense, how about we get ready for the next leg of the mission?"

"Worried about something?" Tinia asked me.

"This easy assault makes me worry about the next one's difficulty. Pirates aren't *that* brainless; they won't sit around waiting to die. And I doubt they enjoy seeing us mow down their bases."

"I see. That makes sense."

The problem was what they'd do. I wouldn't be surprised if it was something totally absent from normal military engagements.

Tinia questioned me further. "If you were a pirate, how would you fight the military?"

"I'd like to just run away, personally, but my pirate buddies would think I was a coward. And even if fleeing was the optimal choice in the moment, Red Flag is a big gang, which could make that impossible. So you'd need to catch the military off guard..." That said, Red Flag would also have no chance in a head-on battle against a regulated army, so of *course* they'd use more underhanded methods. "If I were them, I'd use a singing crystal to call in third-party foes, like I did during the fight against the Belbellum Federation. Not everyone conveniently has one of those on hand, though."

"True, and even a weapon like that is useless unless you're in the midst of the enemy fleet," Elma cut in. "I doubt these pirates' pilots and ships can weave through enemy forces like we can."

"Uh-huh. What about the mines you mentioned, then?"

"Yes, the pirates could lay a minefield of nuclear warheads. Or launch saturation attacks using seeker missiles with nuclear warheads aboard."

Nuclear weapons were apparently outdated in this universe. The techniques for constructing atomic bombs had spread widely long ago and used simple

machinery—simple by this universe’s standards, anyway. The raw materials weren’t easy to get your hands on, due to sales regulations, but pirates using the black market would have an easier time. If they wanted to, they could produce nuclear bombs in quantities comparable to the number of assault rifles on Earth.

The reason pirates didn’t use them more often was that nukes tended to destroy loot along with the enemy. That was also the reason I tried not to use reactive anti-ship torpedoes on pirates. That said, pirates wouldn’t hesitate to use nukes against a major enemy—such as, say, a regulated army. Nuclear warheads turned cheap seeker missiles into superweapons. Few things could be more terrifying.

“I doubt they’ll go that far, though. If Red Flag starts firing nuclear seeker missiles, the Imperial Fleet won’t sit idly by.”

Doing such a thing would, of course, prompt the Imperial Fleet to get even more serious about exterminating the pirates. They’d send a whole army, rather than just the small force Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit led. Red Flag wouldn’t stand a chance of surviving that, and the Imperial Fleet would figuratively hang them as examples—or maybe even hang them literally!

“Anyway, even if this round’s over for now, we need to be careful in the next system,” I warned the girls. “I expect the pirates to straddle a fine line. They’ll mess just enough with Serena to cause problems, but not enough to mobilize the entire Imperial Fleet.”

“True. Even pirates aren’t all stupid.”

“They certainly carry on like a pack of idiots, though.”

“More like drug-addled junkies. Still, a gang this size has to have its share of schemers. You can’t operate a large organization without at least a few smart people.”

“Is that so?”

“Definitely. Let’s not let our guard down, okay?”

Unlike in *Stella Online*, this universe’s pirates were humans with some measure of intelligence. They might have cunning traps in store for us, so we

needed to be wary. At least wary enough that, if we fell for those traps, we wouldn't die instantly.

We finished cleaning up the Sinoskia System; this time, we'd leave the same day. In fact, we took half a day off to celebrate completing the operation ahead of schedule. Finishing early was a good thing; if we'd struggled and taken longer than planned, we'd have been stuck heading to the next system—the Shoa System—without a proper break.

"Man, Serena's troops never rest," I said.

"I presume the lieutenant colonel does not wish to allow the pirates downtime," Mei said through comms. "We've already seen that, the longer we dawdle, the likelier these battles are to take a turn for the worse."

"Makes sense," Mimi agreed, finishing her sensor checks.

A video circulated just a few hours earlier had shown us a battle inside a Sinoskia pirate base. It depicted troops shooting down mutant half-humans who charged mindlessly at them.

Both Mimi and Tinia wound up watching the video all the way to the end. I'd told them they didn't have to force themselves to do so, but I didn't try hard to stop them. The footage was dispiriting, but seeing it now would help us act more calmly if we faced those enemies in person.

Mimi and Tinia had made comments along the lines of "Red Flag really has gone too far." I gathered that the video wiped away any remaining mercy they felt toward pirates, which was good. After all, pirates typically repaid mercy with violence.

"What's our estimated arrival time in the Shoa System?" I asked Mei.

"Approximately fifteen minutes."

"Got it. Let's be ready to move, then. If you need to go to the bathroom, now's the time."

"I'm fine!"

"Same."

“I’m ready as well.”

“All right.” My bladder and bowels were okay too. “Then we’ve got a quick break until warp-out.”

The twins, by the way, had fully recovered. One trip into the medical pod, and they were good as new. They told me they hadn’t used the pod right away because it seemed tactless. Looking back, Mimi and Elma had acted the same way. Was there some tacit understanding in this universe I wasn’t aware of?

Chapter 6:

Resistance

AS I RECALL, Elma was the one who said that pirates weren't all stupid. I agreed, but the Imperial Fleet wasn't stupid either. In fact, their military personnel—especially those who took leadership roles and planned operations—were typically elites, so naturally they were educated. Some were probably what you'd call armchair theorists, but Serena at least was good at her job.

"And here's the result," I muttered.

When we reached the Shoa System and exited FTL drive, the Pirate-Hunting Unit *hadn't* rushed straight for the pirate base at maximum speed.

"Figured this would happen," Elma sighed.

"She's heavy-handed as ever," Mimi giggled.

Ample reduced-output laser cannon fire from the enormous Imperial battleships and heavy cruisers mercilessly mopped up the pirates' mines. The range of the ships' main and secondary weapons far outstripped those of smaller craft, and their reduced-output mode was more than enough to destroy mines. The large ships' scanners were also more suited to detecting mines and anomalies, making them much better at removing obstacles.

The pirates had basically laid a minefield in the area they expected our fleet to warp into, but Serena anticipated that and escaped the devious trick. Of course, this large-scale mine sweep was like a public announcement that we were about to attack Red Flag, but our forces had blocked their escape routes ages ago.

"This is what happens if you slap mines together from whatever's around," I mused. "We don't know whether they're equipped with normal bombs or nuclear warheads, but all we have to do is scan the minefield and destroy anything suspicious. Easy brute-force solution."

"That's what the Imperial Fleet's best at."

“Is there a chance they’ll miss any?”

“Even if they do, an exploding mine would only hit the battleships and heavy cruisers up front. And I doubt these makeshift mines have shield-attenuation devices like anti-ship torpedoes do. If one does explode, it won’t cause major damage. Even the *Krishna*’s shields could withstand a single nuclear warhead, although it’d be close.”

Battleships and heavy cruisers were much more thoroughly shielded. The shields on the *Black Lotus*, barely big enough to be classified as a large ship, were three times as durable as the *Krishna*’s. Military battleships and heavy cruisers’ shields were surely dramatically larger as well. It would be extremely difficult to affect those vessels without weapons that either neutralized or penetrated shields and dealt direct physical damage.

“Have we been left without anything to do here either?” Tinia asked.

“I wonder.”

A big force of extra-large ships like battleships and heavy cruisers could really be overpowered. Those vessels were slow and hard to maneuver—they didn’t pose much threat if you ran away or hid in an asteroid belt—but simply unmatched when destroying fixed targets like pirate bases. The difference in firepower compared to smaller ships couldn’t be overstated.

The design philosophy behind such ships was basically “Step one: fire large-bore laser cannons, nigh-impossible to avoid, from outside enemy range. Step two: enemy dies.” Funny how similar that is to naval warfare, right? Pretty much the same, actually. At the end of the day, it was about who killed the enemy from far away first.

Missiles had become obsolete in space battles for three reasons: slow flight speed, short range, and lack of shields, which meant lasers could down them. Missile-based weapons couldn’t beat laser cannons in terms of range, speed, or accuracy. Still, individual missiles could pack a punch, so self-guiding seeker missiles remained common in battles between small ships. They weren’t too bad in short-range melees, either, but they were useless in long-distance shootouts.

FTL missiles existed in *Stella Online*, but generally as tactical weapons used by

NPCs in special events. They weren't player accessible. Did they exist in this universe, too? I had to assume it was possible; they were basically just nuclear warheads attached to suppression ships.

"Maybe they'll send us in if the pirates, say, launch a saturation attack and fend off Serena's large ships. Otherwise, I don't know..." Although I said that, the asteroid belt on our port side had been bugging me for a while. You *could* hide an ambush on its other side. *Maybe we will fight this round.*

"Huh? Our vanguard's auxiliary guns are moving to the port side," Mimi announced.

"Whoa. So soon, huh?"

"The pirates must've shut their engines down to hide," said Elma. "At this distance, they may try to fire torpedoes."

The *Krishna's* sensors hadn't yet picked up enemy signals, but the vanguard had detected something, judging by the movements of its battleships and heavy cruisers.

"This is shaping up to be a defensive battle. Watch out for friendly fire," I warned the girls.

"Got it!" Mimi replied.

"Aye aye," Elma said.

At that point, a heavy cruiser at the front of the vanguard notified us of the pirates' presence, ordering us to intercept them.

I'm no master of defensive battle, I thought, but let's see what we can do.

"Yeehaaaaaw!"

"Kill 'em all!"

Pirates rushed at us, screaming over open comms as if they were on powerful drugs. They were like a thick cloud of...okay, I'm exaggerating. They were like a *thin swarm* of bees flying out of a hive.

"Our sensors didn't pick them up," Mimi noted. "Does that mean they shut

their ships off while lying in wait?”

“Seems like it,” Elma confirmed. “For all the crazy noise they’re making now, they can be awfully patient.”

“They’re just worked up enough to forget their fear but think clearly, huh? Scary stuff.” I shuddered.

The life of a space pirate apparently wasn’t valuable, judging by how easily the pirates threw them away. I’m sure they had reason, but this charge was basically suicide. I had to wonder what rung on the ladder these guys being used as cannon fodder had.

Serena’s voice came over comms. “Command speaking. Dispatch enemy ships approaching from Sector Three. Small and medium ships, avoid the allied line of fire.”

As she finished speaking, the *Lestarius*’s auxiliary cannons spewed fire—not cannon fire, but some destructive ray—to fend off the pirate ships erupting from the asteroid belt. The other large ships followed suit.

“However many times I see it, that never ceases to amaze,” Mimi mused.

“I’d hate to charge into that,” I agreed. Large ships’ secondary guns were typically about the caliber of medium-sized military vessels’ main guns. In other words, a few direct hits could break even the *Krishna*’s shields. I’m sure you can imagine what would happen to a much frailer pirate ship. “Hmm...this just wasn’t gonna work unless their ambush was perfect, huh?”

The pirates disrupted the Imperial fire with chaff and flares, but it was a futile exercise. Chaff and flares threw off automatic targeting systems, sure, but their foes could just aim manually instead. Deception techniques were handy, but they had their limits.

“That’s just too obvious, though.”

“Yeah,” Elma agreed. “Mimi, turn our active sensors to face away from the large ships’ battle. Maximum range.”

“Huh? O-okay. Wha...?”

“Something *is* coming, huh? Prepare for battle. And send the *Lestarius* our

observational data and a heads-up.”

“Aye aye!”

This was a common tactic. You raised your right fist like you were going to hit someone, drew their attention with that, then really socked them with your left fist. The pirates had distracted us with the land mines and asteroid-belt ambush while their main defense snuck up on us from behind.

I listened absently to Mimi calling the *Lestarius* while I piloted the *Krishna* toward the suspicious signals. Activating our thermal sensors, I displayed the results on the main screen. “There they are.”

“Yup.”

Extremely cold objects were approaching the fleet. The pirates had probably activated their emergency cooling systems to lower their ships’ temperatures, shut down the power completely, and approached us on simple inertia. Thermal stealth, or “cool running” to people in the know—the exact technique I’d once used on the Belbellum Federation.

“Take over firearm controls for me,” I directed Elma.

“Got it.”

The *Krishna*’s firearm-control system used more than just optical sensors and radar. In short, by messing slightly with the settings, Elma could lock on to ships even if they were in thermal stealth.

“Setting complete. Targets locked. Twelve in total. No response to our IFF interrogation.”

“Sounds hostile to me.”

The enemy ships continued to approach. Their power was still off, which likely meant they had no shields, and their eyes and ears were essentially covered. They probably hadn’t noticed that we’d locked on to them, let alone that we were approaching.

“Master Hiro, Serena says we’re free to attack anytime.”

“Got it. Here goes.” Pulling the trigger on my control column, I fired my four heavy lasers. You can guess what happened when a small ship without even a

shield was subjected to that. “One down.”

My heavy laser fire unceremoniously blew the unidentified, suspicious ship to smithereens. Eleven unidentified craft remained.

“The hostile ships have powered up their generators,” Mimi announced.

“Let’s mow down as many as we can before their shields go up.” Even if they’d activated their shields the moment their power went on, there’d be a lag before those shields deployed. I could use that to my advantage.

“They’ve got tough plating for pirate ships,” Elma noted. “They’re better piloted than usual too.”

“Bet you they’re a Red Flag mobile force.”

Pirate ships were usually private craft jerry-rigged for combat, but that changed when you looked at the central forces of a large group like Red Flag. They sometimes trotted out military-grade ships, though I don’t know how they got them. Pirates also captured, repaired, and modified defeated mercenary ships, then flew those.

As my crew and I talked, I downed a second ship. It had panicked, trying to evade, but my flak cannons tore it to pieces.

“I’ve never seen ships like these,” I noted.

“The workmanship doesn’t look Imperial. Maybe they’re from the Federation.”

“Tina and Wiska might be able to identify them.”

“Make a note of that for later.”

The unusual ships had conspicuous form factors that I’d never even seen in *Stella Online*. They were also painted red, which kind of gave the impression of speed or strength. Was that true of these?

The ship I’d targeted withstood one volley of fire. My second volley wasn’t a bullseye, but it destroyed the shields. Flak cannons, bam, dead.

“At times like this, first move really does win,” I noted. When you were up against an unusual enemy and didn’t know what to expect, waiting and

watching was a bad move. It was better to strike hard and set the battle's pace. What you didn't know couldn't hurt you if you killed it first.

"They have a strategy to down our large ships. Careful."

"I know."

In terms of size, you'd have classified these as small ships. Small ships didn't have many methods to down extra-large and large ships like battleships or heavy cruisers, and those methods generally didn't work against other small ships. Even I'd have had trouble hitting another small ship with a reactive torpedo mid-fight.

Not to say I *couldn't*.

"Let's clean up before our reinforcements arrive." I finally had ships to loot, and I was ready to plunder them all.

I'd thrown myself into hunting this rare prey, but after the enemy's fourth ship went down, their behavior changed.

"They're trying to run now, huh?"

"And, at this rate, they'll get away."

Three of the eight remaining ships faced us while the other five swooped away from the battlefield. The paths to other systems were blocked, but that blockade couldn't last forever. If the red ships just hid someplace people rarely went until things blew over, they'd have a good chance of getting out.

"What now?" Mimi asked me and Elma.

"I hate to say it," I answered, "but there isn't much we can do. We might pick a few off if we ignore the ones coming at us, but I'll pass on taking an anti-ship torpedo in the ass." Not even the *Krishna* could withstand an exploding nuclear warhead unscathed without its shields.

"No, that wouldn't be much fun."

"And it doesn't look like our reinforcements will make it in time."

As I listened to Mimi and Elma, I set my sights on one of the three remaining

red ships, feigning a charge and then immediately steering clear.

“Whoa!”

“Jeez!”

I weaved between the three anti-ship torpedoes the red ships facing me had fired. *Yep, they're skilled. They cooperate well—their movements seem tailored to group engagements, as if they've got military training.*

“These guys might have military personnel in their units,” I said.

“Huh? But...”

“Must be vets or deserters.”

Was this related to the ship Serena had wanted us to forget? Not that it mattered now; our job was to kill the enemies facing us.

“Whoopsie.” I'd turned off flight assist as I evaded; when the ship slid in the direction of evasion, I spun it around. Firing flak at the pursuing pirate ships, I turned flight assist back on and activated the afterburner, then bounced the ship in the opposite direction.

Mimi and Elma groaned at the sudden G-force, and Tinia shrieked.

“Erk!”

“Ugh!”

“Eep!”

Unfortunately, I had no time to spare on their comfort while the enemy was working together to hit us with anti-ship torpedoes. The ship I'd struck with flak seemed immobilized; had I hit its cockpit?

The immediate loss of their comrade clearly shook the other two red ships, but I wasn't about to ease up. This was a close-range dogfight now, and I fired off more flak as fast as I could.

At this distance, flak cannons were downright devious. They pierced shields and tore mercilessly through plating and hull alike. From a longer range, they were crappy weapons that couldn't get through shields. If you weren't up close and personal, they did little more than stop seeker missiles, though they

worked well on unarmored space monsters.

“Two...and three. Looks like the rest did get away, huh?” By the time I’d destroyed the three bait ships, the boom of an FTL drive told me the other five red vessels had scrambled. There were ways to trace them, but chasing them down wasn’t our priority. “Mimi, mark their FTL drive’s path to report to Serena later. If she thinks it’s necessary, she’ll send forces after them.”

“Aye aye!”

FTL drive trails were traceable. In *Stella Online*, you could scan the trails—called FTL leaks—and follow them a surprisingly long way. The same technology existed in this universe.

“How’s the rest of the battle going?” I asked Elma.

“Red Flag’s air forces are almost entirely wiped out.”

“The ones who were charging? They must all have died to the initial bombardment, right?”

“That seems to be what happened,” Mimi agreed. “Oh. The *Lestarius* is hailing us.”

“Answer, please.”

Mimi nodded. Serena’s figure appeared on the *Krishna*’s main screen, Lieutenant Robertson next to her.

“I see you fought off an ambush for us,” Serena said.

“Gotta work for my pay. One of their ships is intact, by the way.”

“Mind if I take it off your hands?”

“Gladly, as long as you pay a reasonable price.” I rubbed my fingers together, signaling greed for cash.

Serena grinned wryly. “Very well. Please provide the combat data too.”

“Of course. That’s in the terms of our contract.” The contract required us to share combat and action logs with the Imperial Fleet during battles, so I didn’t mind at all. “Just so you know, their movements were awfully similar to military maneuvers.”

“...I see. I’ll dispatch a recovery team later.”

“Roger. I’ll mark their coordinates.”

Serena hung up.

Hmm. When I told her that, she seemed a little on edge. Maybe Red Flag is linked to the military after all.

“I think you should keep your nose out of stuff that doesn’t concern you, Hiro.”

“That’s fair. When I see that stuff, though, my nose just begs to be stuck in.” I was curious about those unfamiliar red ships, but I’d only left one intact to hand over. Still, the wreckage of the other four ships was all ours. I planned to take it back to show Tina and Wiska.

Tina looked up at the wreckage of the red pirate ship the *Krishna* had towed in the best shape. “Mm. This one’s rare.” Despite that statement, she sounded familiar with it.

“I’ve never seen one like it. Know anything about it?” I asked.

“A manufacturer in the Birginia Star System Alliance makes these ships. I think it’s called the Luterra Company.”

“Birginia Star System Alliance?”

“They’re allies of the Belbellum Federation,” Elma explained. “Birginia’s a galactic alliance on the other end of the Federation. They don’t share a border with the Empire, so it doesn’t interact with Birginia often.”

“Yup. The Empire steers clear of ’em, since they’re allied with the Federation. Not that we get *no* information in about ’em.” Tina tapped her tablet, directing her work bots and drones to start analyzing the ship. “There were more wrecked ships, yeah? Mind scrapin’ together what ya can? We might be able to restore a full ship by slappin’ parts together.”

“Oh? Is there good reason to do that?”

“Well, the manufacturer’s a long ways away, and they don’t have diplomatic

relations with us, so you don't see their vessels in the Empire often. Collectin' enough data to replicate one would be a real feather in an engineer's cap!"

"That so?"

"And I bet Space Dwergr would pay through the nose for a fully restored ship..."

"Good call. Let's do it."

But where would copyright, or patent rights, or whatever come in? Part of me wondered, but a company as big as Space Dwergr would have ways around those.

"This really reeks, though," Elma muttered.

"It does. The military maybe being involved, a combat ship that seemingly came from our enemy's ally... It *is* a combat ship, right?" Mimi checked.

"Yup," Tina confirmed. "I forget the model number and stuff, but I'm pretty sure it's designed for fightin'. It's nothin' like those souped-up civilian ships pirates usually fly around."

Wiska had an oddly concerned expression.

"Er, when you said 'military'...did you mean the *Imperial* military?" Tinia asked uneasily, cradling the sacred tree's seed.

"We don't have any proof," I said. "Just ignore us for now."

"I'll do that..." Tinia replied. "I take it that mercenary work forces you to learn quite a few things you shouldn't."

"*We* especially might," Elma replied with a thoroughly fed-up expression.

I had to agree. Still, it seemed like Elma was implying that was my fault. *Come on. I didn't do anything wrong, did I?*

"Are you sure we should restore the ship?" Wiska asked me.

"Loot from destroyed pirate ships normally belongs to the mercenary who downed the ship. What to do with it's up to that merc. If the Empire has a problem with that, they're sure to let us know, so I'd say there's nothing to worry about."

“I hope you’re right...” Wiska still looked uneasy.

In my defense, if I were Serena, I’d consider it safest to see the wreckage sent to Space Dwergr. They’d certainly keep the matter under wraps. Even if they reverse-engineered the craft and applied the technology they gained, they couldn’t exactly publicize how they’d developed it. When I fought the red craft, they’d seemed fast and well-balanced, and Space Dwergr was apparently working on similar ships. I figured the wreckage would be a good reference for them.

“Once you know the craft’s weapons, functions, and general specs, pass that info on to me,” I directed the twins.

“Leave it to us, boss!”

“Yes, please leave it with us.”

They gave me matching thumbs-ups. *You two really are twins.*

“You weren’t away long,” said Tinia. “Is the battle over already?”

“For us, at least. The pirate base is probably a laser-filled hell right now.”

“They sent troops in again?” said Elma. “Why not just blow the whole damn thing to bits?”

“I’m sure the brass has reasons.” If the Imperial Fleet had connections to Red Flag *and* the enemy Belbellum Federation, that was a massive problem—totally intolerable. It would lead to serious trouble. “Well, I feel bad for those foot soldiers, but *we’re* going to relax.”

“We *do* need to be ready to leave at any moment,” Elma pointed out.

I shrugged and headed back to the *Krishna*. Either way, it was time to start working on those pirate ships.

After we’d picked over the completely totaled vessels, the twins started repairing the relatively intact one—all the while worriedly discussing whether we’d get in hot water. Atop the *Krishna*’s ladder, I surveyed the destroyed red ship, the drones buzzing around it, the busy maintenance bots, and Tina and Wiska controlling them all. I didn’t understand one bit of the work, of course.

“I can’t make heads or tails of this,” I admitted in a low voice.

“Me neither,” Mimi agreed.

“Well, no,” Elma scoffed.

“At least it’s fun to watch all the little machines fly around,” said Tinia. “I’d never have seen something like this back in the Grald Clan.”

“That’s true, I guess. I feel like I could watch this all day, although it makes no sense to me.”

The raid on the base had turned into a real battle, keeping the ground forces busy for a while. But things had settled down. The military was disposing of stragglers, and we were on standby, ready for an emergency launch if pirate reinforcements showed up.

“For a while now, I’ve been thinking... The military’s pace is surprisingly relaxed, isn’t it?” Tinia noted.

“That’s par for the course,” I said. “Gathering a big force requires more adjustment and advance prep. Even if the troops inside the base are just clearing out stragglers, they’re still in active combat, and we can’t bail on them just to push ahead.”

“If you don’t coordinate well, you’ll bottleneck your forces,” Elma added. “Attacking once with a hundred ships is totally different from attacking a hundred times with one—or even twenty times with five.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Mimi. “Master Hiro could handle a hundred successive one-on-one duels, surely, but he couldn’t fight off a hundred enemies at once.”

“Part of me wonders if he *could*,” Tinia murmured.

“Okay, don’t be silly,” I said. “That’d obviously be too many.”

Maybe I’d eke out an unlikely win, but it wasn’t like I wanted to try. I mean, I didn’t want to fight on land in the first place, and lasers set to lethal weren’t exactly something I’d enjoy being hit by. My merc gear and underwear were made of special fibers that resisted lasers to a degree, but I didn’t know how well they worked, and I’d pass on getting shot just to find out.

“Anyway, that’s the long and short of it,” I said, bringing things back on track.

“As a force gets larger, it gets heavier on its feet. There are always trade-offs, but groups do have advantages.”

“True. More personnel carry more loot and cover each other better in emergencies.”

“Yup,” said Elma. “I mean, if we lost the *Krishna* right now, we’d be screwed. The *Black Lotus* is a great ship, but it’s just not as maneuverable.”

“You got that right,” I said. “Should we get you your own small ship soon, Elma?”

She looked at me as if she was surprised. *Actually, she probably is.*

“Huh? But then...”

“I’d buy the ship and hire you as captain. As owner, I’d get a better cut of the revenue, but you’d make more money than now.”

“Um...”

“Or would you want to split off if you had your own ship? That’d be within your rights, although I don’t want you to.”

Ever since I’d arrived in this universe, Elma had been helping me, and I’d likewise helped her. We’d supported each other—at least, that was what I’d thought. Maybe I was more indebted to her; I tended to rely on her a lot.

“O-of course I don’t plan on leaving you...”

“Then think about the ship. I trust you to watch my back.”

“Yeah. I’ll think about it.” Elma smiled, looking genuinely happy.

Feeling eyes on me, I turned to Mimi, who appeared rather expectant. “You’d be stepping up to sub-pilot, Mimi. Think you could handle it?”

“I’d do my best!” Mimi cracked her knuckles eagerly in front of her chest. She had plenty of experience as an operator now, so it was about time for a promotion.

Both Elma and I could work as operators, obviously. I’d piloted my ship solo back in *Stella Online*, so I could handle sensors, sub-systems, and other components. I’d chosen to do so manually in the game, although I could’ve

hired NPCs to automate flight to a degree.

“Then that’s our plan from now on. We’ll have to pick a ship, too.”

If we had another ship besides the *Krishna* to stop escaping enemies, we’d make more money. Naturally, with the *Krishna* as our only mobile force, we lost some targets. Already, there’d been several instances when I was unable to pursue prey in time.

“I want the *Swan*,” Elma said.

“Denied. Haven’t you learned yet?”

“Grr...”

The *Galactic Swan*, a ship that Elma used to fly, had extremely high specs—but it also had a crappy hidden feature that blew it up if you got carried away and pushed it too hard.

It was clearly a defective machine worthy of a recall, but for some reason, it was still in use. *Come to think of it, I don’t remember seeing a Swan anywhere else. They’re expensive, so maybe they aren’t used much here. How the hell did Elma get her hands on one of those, anyway?*

“Remember, I’ll own it,” I repeated. “So I get final say on what ship we buy.”

“Shame, but I’ll just have to respect the owner’s orders. Are you sure about spending that much money, though? It’ll set you back from your goal.”

“That’s fine. Mimi and I have first-class citizenship, and I’m sure you had it already as well. We’ll have to think about the twins, but we can lean on plenty of connections.”

“That’s fair.”

We could count on Count Dalenwald, and even if I didn’t want to rely on Serena, she was a...connection. Heck, thanks to Mimi’s lineage, it might be possible to ask the Emperor himself—though that was a last resort.

Anyhow, at the rate we earned money, recouping the cost of a ship for Elma wouldn’t take long. Having a third ship alongside the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* would actually widen our range of activities, enabling us to take more requests.

“On that note, we’ll pick out your ship once we’re done with this job. We were planning to visit a high-tech system to buy lightweight power armor, so adding a ship to our shopping list works out fine.”

“True. Now that we can use gateways, it won’t take long to go directly to a manufacturer’s headquarters.”

In a system with cutting-edge technology, we’d have ready access to information on all kinds of innovative equipment; researching a snazzy ship would be easier. There’d be ship dealers around too.

“I’m getting excited for our next destination!” Mimi piped up.

“All the more reason to finish our current job,” Elma added.

“Yeah. At this rate, it’ll be over after one or two more bases. Let’s put our backs into it, girls.”

“Okay!”

“Roger that.”

I glanced over and saw Tinia looking at us as if we dazzled her. Those were the eyes of someone looking at something they’d never reach. In the end, I couldn’t think of anything to say to her. If I could’ve comforted her at a time like this, maybe I’d have been a bigger man; alas, I wasn’t quick-witted enough.

We swept two more systems but turned up nothing. More precisely, there were pirate bases, but they were abandoned, so we encountered no resistance.

Serena had blockaded the systems, of course. Expecting the pirates to react more quickly, she’d implemented the blockades rapidly with the help of local star system forces and the Imperial Fleet. But Red Flag managed to disappear without getting caught in the blockade. Their abandoned bases contained no useful information on their current whereabouts; the pirates had carefully wiped their data storage, then physically destroyed the devices for good measure.

“Kind of disappointing, isn’t it?” Mimi muttered, lying face down on the *Black Lotus*’s dining-hall table. “I braced myself for a decisive final battle.” This

disappointment before her impending promotion had flummoxed her.

“Nah, not happening. I think it’s a letdown too, but it’s what we expected.” I downed the rest of my lukewarm tea.

Red Flag had never really had the option of fighting us head-on. There was too great a difference in our ship, equipment, and training quality. The pirates made their living attacking poorly armed civilian ships. They knew they’d lose against people who were even half-prepared.

“Wonder where Red Flag ran off to,” Tina said.

Wiska thought back. “They weren’t caught in the blockade, huh?”

The twins had joined us for our break, though they wore their work jumpsuits. The maintenance bots and drones were still busy, though, and the twins kept an eye on them using their tablets.

“They must’ve fled to deep space,” Elma mused.

“Deep space?” Tina cocked her head. That phrase was evidently unfamiliar to her.

“‘Outer space’ is a very broad term,” I explained. “‘Deep space’ is the space outside star systems without hyperlane exits.”

“All...right...” It seemed my explanation meant nothing to her.

“Basically, we think the surviving pirates escaped through old-school interstellar travel via FTL drives and cold sleep pods.”

“What’ll happen to them?”

“The average distance between stars is about three light-years, I think. Moving to the nearest star system would take them one or two years minimum, depending how well their FTL drives work.”

“Just enough time for the dust to settle,” Elma added. “But they might head even further away.”

“If so, that could take a decade. Or even twenty years. Everyone will have forgotten that they ever existed.”

Still, pursuing the pirates into deep space wasn’t realistic. Even if we knew

their exact route, catching them could take months or even years, and it'd take just as long to get back if we succeeded. However powerful the Imperial Fleet was, it couldn't waste precious ships on such a long wild goose chase.

"Although it isn't satisfying, depending how you interpret it, you essentially chased them into deep space for the foreseeable future?" Tinia summarized. "Is that right?"

"Yeah. Interstellar travel using just an FTL drive is dangerous, so some pirates might not even survive to their destination." If any FTL drives, shields, cold sleep pods, or life-support systems failed, the escaped pirates were as good as dead. The journey would be arduous for them.

"I imagine these results are also unsatisfying to the lieutenant colonel, who wanted them eradicated," Mei said coolly, pouring fresh tea into my cup. "Nonetheless, chasing a large pirate gang out of these star systems was enough of an accomplishment."

"Serena, the Imperial Fleet, and the local star system army have a new achievement under their belts, and we get rewarded," I summarized. "Win-win. Everyone ends up happy."

"Everyone ends up happy, huh...?" Tina had a tense expression. "The bad guys end up unhappy."

Indeed, while we were all content with this resolution, the pirates had lost comrades, we'd forced them out of their hideouts. Not *everyone* involved came out of this happy, in that sense.

"Got a problem with that?"

"Can't say. I've always been on the side of bad guys; they've got their reasons. I've seen plenty of folks corrupted 'cause of things beyond their control."

"Sis..."

"But this is different, I guess." Tina shrugged. "What is it y'all say? 'Kill all pirates, no mercy'?"

"Exactly. If you want to consider what's right for the universe, we're the moral side," I said. "As for whether it's *ethically* right to kill pirates without question..."

Well, I guess it's not."

"Now you're gonna pull the rug out from under me?!" Tina snapped, indignant.

"I mean, they're pirates..."

"Exactly," Elma agreed.

That was just how it was from my and Elma's point of view. We could've talked for hours about how cowardly and cruel pirates were. Whether you said they were born into it, that it was the only way they knew, or that they lacked other choices, we didn't care in the end.

All I could do was kill them and hope they were reborn as anything but space pirates in their next lives. I mean, even if piracy was the only thing you knew, that surely couldn't justify attacking innocent civilian ships, stealing their cargo, then processing the crew and passengers and selling them into slavery as you pleased, could it?

"Sure, ya ain't wrong, but..."

"If you can't set that pity aside, you can't make a living as a mercenary—which forces us to always be on the lookout for pirates."

"Is that true?" Tina asked curiously.

"It really is," Mimi answered. "Even Master Hiro and Elma avoid walking around alone. When we land at a colony, they usually take Mei as a bodyguard. And they always visit the local mercenary guild or military post first, to see how safe an area is."

"Mercenaries are in less danger aboard their ships. Pirates nurse a real grudge against us. If we're not careful, gangs or hoodlums linked to pirates could drag us into a back alley. You know what'd happen after that." Elma moved her index finger as if slitting her neck.

"Whoa. Yer givin' me chills. Now that ya mention it, hon never goes out without you or Mei, does he?"

"They could also target people riding on our ship, like you. Hiro's careful in that regard. He bought Mei and the battle bots to bolster security."

“He’s been telling us to bring battle bots as bodyguards and luggage carriers when we go out...” Wiska remembered.

“Sounds kinda overprotective to me,” said Tina. The twins’ eyes focused on me.

Overprotective? Me? You’re the ones who got kidnapped and almost wound up in deep trouble. Isn’t it natural to take precautions so that doesn’t happen again?

“Come on, hon,” Tina smirked. “Ya did all that, but still refused for so long to touch us?”

“Yes.”

“Um...” Wiska looked noticeably feverish. Why had things suddenly gotten awkward?

“Okay, that’s enough of this,” I declared. “Let’s discuss our plans.”

“I’ve never seen someone change the subject so brazenly.”

“No kiddin’!”

“Blah, blah, I can’t hear you! Anyway, as soon as this mission’s over, we’ll grab our earnings and head back to the Leafil System. It’s time to take Tinia and the sacred tree seed home.” I glanced at Tinia. For some reason, she trembled. “Afterward, we’ll find an advanced system to check out. We have business to finish in Leafil, though, so we’ll stay a while.”

I had things to get from Zesh; moreover, I’d feel awful leaving Tinia behind in her uncertain state. I wanted to settle things before we left, no matter how it had to happen.

“That might be for the best,” Elma said. “The Minpha Clan chieftain was obsessed with you.”

“Yeah. Plus, I’d love to go back to the Willroses to hear more stories about adorable baby Elma.” My counterattack hit Elma head-on; her cheeks twitched. *Heh. I win this round.*

“I can’t wait!” Mimi probably hadn’t meant to twist the knife, but Elma clearly couldn’t stand the thought of us digging up her childhood any more.

“Ya ain’t picked a destination after the Leafil System, right, hon? How about makin’ sure it’s someplace where our company has a branch office?”

“Good idea. We can hand over the repaired ship, catch up on paperwork, and...so much more...” Wiska shuddered. “You sure selling that ship is okay?”

“Fine by me,” I insisted. “If it’s really good, we could give it to Elma, but it doesn’t seem *that* exceptional to me.” It did look high-quality for a pirate craft, but a mercenary fighting on front lines needed better. Besides, the vessel was produced by a far-off manufacturer we weren’t familiar with; its range of customizations here in the Empire would be limited. “Mimi, consult Tina and Wiska to pick that destination.”

“Understood!”

“That’s all for now. We’ll stand by in case of any crazy sudden emergencies. Mei, continue to manage and operate the *Black Lotus*.”

“Yes, Master.”

For the moment, this was probably the end of the whole pirate mess. Time to go back to leisurely independent work.

“You’re dissatisfied.”

“I’m just painfully aware of my lack of power.”

The Red Flag cleanup operation’s main objective had been to reduce the pirate syndicate’s sphere of influence to as close to zero as possible. We’d obliterated their bases and chased the bulk of their offensive forces into deep space, so in the broadest sense, we could class the operation as a success.

We would need to keep an eye on things for a while, but the hyperlanes to surrounding systems were under our control, making it unlikely stray ships would escape that way. We’d also bolstered patrols within the system, so it was unlikely they’d be able to hide there. Red Flag’s only escape route was into deep space.

The question of where they went remained, but assuming they’d been reduced to FTL interstellar travel, it would take them just under two years to

reach the nearest system. Any farther destination would take over a decade. In addition, there was no guarantee that they'd arrive safely, since we'd essentially expelled them from the hyperlane network.

However, my forces had failed to achieve our secondary goal of either killing or detaining Red Flag's leadership. You could say that we'd gotten rid of the threat Red Flag presented for now, but as commander of the operation, it still left an awful taste in my mouth. I disliked leaving seeds of trouble behind to sprout.

"Yet...was there anything more I could've done?"

"The young female lieutenant colonel who repelled the Belbellum invasion, scattered countless pirates, and did great deeds during the Crystal War has succeeded in eliminating a huge pirate gang and effectively erasing them from the hyperlane network. With no major losses, at that! I'd consider this a major victory."

"I'd accept that more readily if only I had their ringleader's head," I muttered, feeling my brow furrow.

Ahead of me, a PR officer for the Imperial Fleet spoke proudly about our efforts during the operation. Next to him played a holo-video of me, no doubt taken by a war correspondent. It might not be my place to say this, but I photograph quite well.

"Our citizens rejoice at the birth of a new heroine, merchants can travel the routes with more confidence than ever, and the military has achieved success in the public eye. A win-win-win, if I ever heard one!"

"The situation hardly feels worth celebrating," I muttered.

Recalling what we'd learned through this operation gave me a headache. Aboard the ship *he* had captured was a soldier from Leafil System's own fleet—an elf. That elf soldier's involvement had led to Red Flag's two successful drop raids. Well, I supposed the second drop raid had ended in failure.

We were still figuring out specifics of the soldier's background, but all signs indicated he'd hardly sunk to piracy due to falling on hard times. People from all walks of life had dark desires to some extent; some of us were bound to

succumb to the sweet temptation to fulfill them.

That was also true of elves. Many people believed that, thanks to elves' long lifespans, they were capable of greater patience and calmer thinking than humans. But there were always exceptions. That was all there was to it.

"We're currently investigating the pirates' usage of ships believed to be from the Birginian Star System Alliance," I said. "I wouldn't be surprised to learn they procured those ships through Belbellum."

Space pirates had their own distribution network, referred to as the "black market." If a pirate gang had the money and access to the black market, it wouldn't be remarkable for them to procure Birginian ships in bulk.

"It's hard to believe that their reach could extend all the way from the Belbellum border to the Leafil System, but..."

"Nothing is impossible," I replied. "Is that what you mean to say?"

"Exactly. As Imperial soldiers, we must consider every possibility for the sake of our people. It would be foolish to brush these indications off as impossible."

"The enemy commandos were unusually skilled as well."

"Thinking about the future may be dispiriting at the moment, but it's *our* duty to struggle behind the scenes. All you need do is continue to liven up the scenes for us."

"Yes, sir." I saluted the holo-display.

"By the way, this is a more confidential matter..."

"Yes?"

"Do you think you'll bring him down? I can't help but notice you encounter him every step of the way."

"...I'm hard at work on that."

"If it's too difficult, I can take measures myself."

"Please refrain from inserting yourself where you're not needed. Goodbye, Father."

"Wait—"

I hung up and heaved a sigh. He was surprisingly on board with this; I was glad. That said, his intervention would only make my target warier. It had already taken ages to get him to stop running away from me all the time.

When I had a target in my sights, I didn't let it go. But prudence, my friend—prudence.

Lieutenant Colonel Serena's operation ended with the Empire dealing Red Flag a major blow, forcing the pirate gang into deep space. Despite that blow, the pirates' ringleader and higher-ups escaped. The rest of Red Flag had also turned tail and run in the latter half of the operation, making for something of a disappointing conclusion. Still, it was a major accomplishment that we'd expelled such widely influential pirates without casualties.

"This conclusion leaves me with misgivings," Serena had admitted, but the military and public were much less diffident. At this rate, Serena would be up for another promotion. Maybe next time we met, she'd be a full-on colonel instead of just a lieutenant colonel.

At the *Black Lotus's* dining-room table, I rested my cheek in my hand, reading an article on my tablet. "This is how things come off on the surface, anyway," I muttered as I read.

"Ah ha ha..." Mimi tittered.

"Don't leak anything, got it?" Elma instructed.

"Of course not," I replied. "Who'd do something that awful?"

The article basically contained only superficial information, as well as praise for the young commander who'd led the operation. The Imperial Fleet had essentially set Serena up as a simple heroine—idolized her, even. Of course, she wasn't *just* a figurehead; she was capable and of noble blood. I figured it was a good scheme. Serena hated injustice and corruption, so she was sure to be indispensable to the Empire in future.

"Wonder what's really going on," I mused. "The Imperial Fleet itself still seems suspicious, doesn't it?"

“It’s a massive organization, so it’s obviously not unified in every respect,” Elma mused. “You know what they say: gather three people, and you’ll have two factions.” A born noble armed with a mercenary’s life experience, she seemed to think that was obvious.

“As an Imperial citizen, that’s difficult to swallow.” Mimi, who’d lived an ordinary citizen’s life until recently, seemed to have mixed feelings about the fleet’s internal affairs.

Imperial civilians viewed the military as a heroic force that protected them from invasion, pirates, and space monsters. But we’d seen things that made it clear that at least some Imperial Fleet members worked with pirates or hostile factions for their own gain.

For example, that guy who killed Chris’s parents, attempting to usurp the title of Count Dalenwald... What was his name again? I couldn’t remember. But her uncle had gotten his hands on secret Imperial Fleet weaponry, and a whole bunch of other incidents had stunk of corruption in the Imperial Fleet. Even Red Flag’s unusual speed in this latest operation suggested that someone leaked Serena’s plans to them. And the pirates’ ambush force had military-grade training.

“That ambush force might be related to the Belbellum Federation, though, rather than the Imperial Fleet.”

“True. But that would mean Belbellum agents infiltrated deep into Imperial territory and are working to destroy it from the inside.”

“That sounds awful too,” said Mimi. “And we can’t let anyone know about this, can we?”

“I’m guessing that’s why we got hush money on top of our other earnings,” I answered.

The Imperial Fleet had paid a surprisingly handsome reward this time. It wasn’t enough to buy another fully kitted-out *Black Lotus*, but combined with our savings, we’d have more than enough for a thoroughly customized small ship.

“If they learn anything from that ship they took,” Mimi continued, “Will they

tell us?”

“I doubt it. And frankly, I don’t want to know. Curiosity killed the cat.”

“That’s right,” Elma agreed. “Get too nosy about the military’s dirty work, and you’ll wind up *doing* it. I’m not interested in that.”

“Damn right. They’ll be like ‘Should you or any member of your crew be caught or killed, we will disavow any knowledge of your actions. This holo-data will self-destruct in five seconds.’”

“I don’t like the sound of that. Also, why did that line sound so familiar?”

“Knowing Hiro, it’s probably from some holo-movie.”

She was correct. When we got a little shore leave at a colony, I’d occasionally go find holo-data for retro movies sold on data chips for next to nothing. Handheld terminals, tablets, and holo-displays could play them, and I’d secretly gotten into collecting the retro-movie chips. Some of the movies were garbage, but that was okay.

I often watched them with the girls in the lounge or in my room during hyperlane travel and other downtime. Being a freelancer didn’t mean that I had to work whenever I had free time, after all. Sometimes, it was nice to relax.

“We will soon enter the Leafil System, Master,” Mei announced.

We had nothing to do during hyperlane travel, so we’d hung out in the dining hall, but we’d seemingly be off the ship soon. I appreciated Mei piloting while the rest of us took a break. She deserved to be spoiled once we landed and I could make time for her. That said, anytime I tried to spoil her, she seemed to spoil *me* way more...but never mind that.

The twins weren’t kicking back with us. They were shooting the breeze too, but they were in the middle of repairing that strange pirate ship. They were essentially trying to build one complete vessel from the wreckage of several, and were seemingly making progress.

As for Tinia, she often stood around and stared vacantly into space, cradling the sacred tree seed. She probably had a lot on her mind, so I left her alone, despite asking the crew to keep an eye on her.

“I’ll stand by in the *Krishna* so we can be ready to launch anytime,” I declared.

“Okay.” Mimi stood and followed me, noting curiously, “You’re surprisingly wary, huh?”

“He’s just being cautious,” said Elma. “This operation hit Red Flag where it hurts, and we stood out a fair bit.”

The news had even covered our role, though we didn’t get the coverage Serena had. Just some brief mentions of Captain Hiro—platinum-ranker and winner of His Majesty’s tournament—being part of the operation. Still, we’d stopped the pirates’ all-or-nothing ambush, and that unit’s survivors had no doubt told Red Flag’s leaders about us. Those leaders might try to gather information on us.

“Think they’ll try to take revenge on us?” Mimi asked, pale.

I shrugged. “Can’t deny the possibility. Even the full power of Red Flag couldn’t beat the Imperial Fleet, but they could gang up on a platinum-rank mercenary’s crew as a show of strength... Or so they might think.”

“We’d be a one-way ticket to newsworthiness,” Elma agreed.

“Thrashing and capturing us in front of the Empire would convey their strength. Demonstrate that Red Flag survived.”

“Th-that sounds awful! Is that why you were on high alert en route here?”

“Yep. But it’s not any different from the usual threat level.” Elma spoke casually, but pirates capturing our entire ship and escape pod would be different from them just destroying it and us dying with the ship. If the former happened, I didn’t want to imagine how we’d end up. That was why I was on max alert.

We walked and talked all the way to the hangar. As usual, maintenance bots and drones buzzed around, restoring the pirate ship.

“Hey, you two!” I called to the twins, who were still working. “We’re almost in the Leafil System. Get ready!”

“Gotcha, boss!”

“Yes, sir!”

From there, I headed to the *Krishna*. I found Tinia waiting at the top of the ladder.

“What’re you up to, Tinia?”

“I’d like to join you, if I may.”

“Sure. You can take the sub-operator chair as usual.”

She tried to act normal, but her face betrayed a lack of drive...a complete lethargy, really. Was that little seed bastard draining her life force or something? I’d need to question it later.

I performed diagnostics checks with Elma, watching from the side as the nervous Mimi checked the sensors and comms as usual.

“Don’t be nervous. It’s the same as always.” Tina and Wiska kept the ship in perfect shape.

“R-right,” Mimi stammered.

“Is something wrong?” Tinia asked. “Is there danger in the Leafil System?”

“We should be okay, but you never know what might happen,” I replied.

“You don’t...?”

My statement wouldn’t make sense to Tinia, who didn’t understand our apprehensions. It didn’t *need* to, though, since she’d be leaving soon. Mimi and Elma knew that as well, so they basically kept quiet.

“We tend to run into trouble right after we warp out,” Elma did say nonchalantly.

“I hate to admit it, but it’s true.” I sighed as I set the *Krishna*’s console to display the *Black Lotus*’s sensor readings. The *Black Lotus* was still traveling in hyperspace, so we saw a rainbow-colored tunnel—the inside of the hyperlane.

“Still an incredible sight,” I noted. “Mei, as soon as we exit the hyperlane, monitor all directions. Be ready to activate weapons at the drop of a hat. Keep the hangar hatch and electromagnetic catapult on standby, too.”

“Aye aye, Master,” Mei replied.

I activated the *Krishna*’s main generator and prepped for launch. Five seconds

remained until hyperlane exit. Four. Three. Two. One...

“Hyperlane exit complete. No sign of other ships in the vicinity,” Mei announced.

“Got it. Remain on alert and take us to Leafil Prime.”

“Aye aye. Activating FTL drive.”

I side-eyed Mimi as she heaved a sigh of obvious relief, but I sighed too. *Man, I don't think I'll relax for a while.*

Chapter 7:

The Lucky Looter

“WELCOME TO PORT, Captain Hiro.”

“Thanks.” I replied offhandedly to the Port Authority’s greeting call, steering the *Krishna* toward a good view of Leafil Prime’s port district. “I see a bunch of unfamiliar ships.”

“Hm?” Mimi cocked her head, perplexed. “Unfamiliar?”

Her confusion was warranted. We didn’t base our operations around a single colony, so most ships were “unfamiliar” to us, seen once and then never again. It was more unusual to see *familiar* ships, unless we were traveling with a unit, as we had with Serena’s *Lestarius*.

“Oh—you mean *models* you haven’t seen before? Now that you mention it, those are strange designs.”

“Think they’re mercs or a deep-space exploration unit?” Elma suggested.

“There are a lot of them, so I can’t say for sure, but they look a little too well-armed to be an exploration team or armed convoy. If pressed, I’d say they’re a mercenary group.”

What had drawn my attention was the bright-red ship parked right in the middle of the port. It was large for its size classification, like the *Krishna*—just small enough to call a small ship. As for its weapons...it was hard to say. All I could make out from a quick overhead view was a large-bore cannon mounted on the roof.

“That one sure stands out,” said Elma.

“Yeah. It reminds me of the *Krishna* somehow.”

Maybe you’d call it the style. The top-mounted large-bore cannon gave the vessel a different shape, but its flow was similar.

“What do you think?” Elma asked, eyes fixed on the unfamiliar fleet. I knew

what she meant: were they related to Red Flag somehow?

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, can’t say, but I think we should be wary. Back home they used to say, ‘It’s darkest under the lighthouse.’”

“Darkest under the lighthouse... Still, they’d be bold to attack.”

“They’d have nerves of steel.”

This was the first system we’d cleaned up during Serena’s Red Flag operation. It would normally be unthinkable for people working with pirates to be in its main colony. If pirates and their connections were anything, though, they were insane. You never knew what they might do.

“Mei,” I called.

“Yes. I’ve scoured public security information on Leafil Prime from the past two weeks. No major problems seem to have arisen. Public safety seemingly improved following our anti-piracy operation. There have been no signs of subterfuge.”

“I see.” Nothing concrete was piquing my anxiety, nothing at all, but I couldn’t shake that bad feeling.

“You still don’t look too happy.”

“Alarm bells are going off in my head. I sense really dire trouble.”

“Oh... This is one of *those* concerns.” Mimi grinned wryly.

“Yup. One of *those*.” Elma sighed. “Well, let’s be more careful than usual.”

Look, I don’t choose to have these bad feelings, okay?

Tinia simply watched our conversation in utter confusion.

Although I’d have Mimi and the other girls stay on the ship, I put in a landing request to Leafil IV.

This time, I planned to land at the largest port in the Rosé Clan’s territory. Unfortunately, it didn’t have enough space for the *Black Lotus*, but the *Krishna* could dock just fine. We could’ve used the same general port facility as last time, but Minpha and Grald Clan members might come bother us again if we

did. We were here to visit the Willroses in Rosé Clan territory anyway, so I wanted to distance us from the Grald and Minpha Clans.

“Are you sure the others will be all right on their own?” Elma asked me.

“As long as they stay inside, nothing should go wrong. The shields are on, and even if someone breached the hull, they’d have the battle bots.”

“I am constantly monitoring the situation aboard the *Black Lotus* as well,” Mei assured us.

The *Black Lotus*’s security was as perfect as ever. Red Flag could potentially be targeting us now, so we were being fifty percent more careful than usual. I mean, hopefully you assumed that much, since I even had Mei accompany Elma and me to the mercenary guild.

“The colony doesn’t look much different, at least.”

“Nope.”

We took stock of things while we walked from the *Black Lotus* to the mercenary guild. The only apparent difference was the unusual number of ships docked; otherwise, the port didn’t seem much livelier than usual. As I’d suspected, the fleet we’d seen parked here definitely weren’t merchant craft shipping goods.

“The passengers look disciplined to me,” Elma noted. “Like soldiers.”

“I must agree, Miss Elma. Many look our way, but none approach us.”

“Soldiers, huh?” I said. “That alone raises my hackles.”

The military-style coordinated ambush on the large ships flashed through my mind. Whether the Imperial Fleet or Belbellum Federation was involved, I certainly didn’t want to go near these ships.

“They appear to be communicating,” Mei said. “They’re seemingly sending signals, although due to their speed, I couldn’t intercept them.”

“Whoa... Okay, I like this even less. Let’s get our business done and clear out.” We’d intentionally exposed ourselves in the colony, despite the danger right now, for recon purposes—namely, to see how the strange ships’ passengers reacted to us. Maybe that was a little risky, but it was hard to plan without

knowing their reaction. “Maybe we should’ve stayed in the *Black Lotus*.”

“I don’t know. At least now we know they have some interest in our presence.”

“I hope that’s all it is...”

After walking a while, we entered the mercenary guild without anyone bothering us. Maybe because our sweep had cleared out so many pirates, the guild was quiet. As we entered, the bored-looking female elf at the reception desk lit up.

“Welcome, come on in!” she called.

Heading toward the beaming receptionist, Elma and I traded comments under our breath.

“What is this, a restaurant?”

“First time anyone’s said *that* to me in a mercenary guild...”

Mei followed us, perfectly expressionless. It seemed she had no commentary.

“Sorry!” chirped the receptionist. “Nobody at all’s come by in the past few days. I couldn’t help myself.”

“Think this branch will stay open?” Elma asked me.

“It doubles as a public office, so I figure they’ll manage.” I turned to the receptionist. “Is there any work available?”

The girl shrugged. “Not one bit. The merchant ships up and left when the blockade finally lifted four days ago, so not even merchant escort work is coming in. There’s virtually no pirate activity either.”

“And the surrounding systems have all been cleaned up,” I reflected. “It’ll be a while before more pirates show up.”

“The trade and private ships that left will flood back in before long,” said the receptionist. “It’ll be livelier then.”

“So, are those ships in the port mercenaries waiting for the merchants or something?”

“That’s right. They belong to a group called Crimson Lance led by a gold-rank

mercenary.”

“Gold, huh? Higher than Elma.”

“Shut up.” Elma kicked me in the shin, annoyed. It hurt badly.

I figured a lone wolf like Elma would naturally rise through the ranks more slowly than someone leading such a large fleet. Then again, I didn’t even know what percentage of the gold-ranked merc’s achievements were legitimate.

Hmm? Was I suspicious of Crimson Lance? I didn’t have cause, but of course I was. It was just too convenient that they were here. Their excuse for being in the system, their status as a group headed by a gold-ranker—this was contrived. No way would a group like that just happen to land in the same port as me, a magnet for trouble. I knew paranoia was totally tainting my reasoning, but given what I’d been through, you could hardly blame me.

“Oh! Speak of the devil. The gold-ranker is here,” said the elf at the counter.

When I turned to follow her sightline, I saw a beautiful, imposing woman flanked by brawny men.

She was flashy. Her magenta-pink hair stood out most. She wore an off-the-shoulder blouse, corset skirt, and a laser gun at each hip. Everyone around her was dressed for space travel, but she looked less futuristic...as if she lived in a fantasy world. Except for the laser guns, anyway.

“What’s this?” She looked back at me, gauging me like a snake sizing up its prey. “Well, well. Fancy meeting a celebrity here. You’re Captain Hiro!”

“In the flesh. I don’t know your name, though.”

“Ha ha! I think I’m a little famous myself. Though not as famous as *you*.” She stepped forward and introduced herself, oozing with confidence. “I’m Captain Mary, a merc famous for stomping out pirates, just like yourself. Some call me Lucky Looter Mary.”

“Well, my pleasure. I guess you already knew this, but yeah, I’m Captain Hiro. No need for a handshake, I guess.” When I saw Captain Mary’s devious grin, one thing was clear: she was my enemy.

“Oh? You won’t let me shake your hand?”

“Sorry. I’m a little shy.” Furtively assessing the distance between us, I considered my options. Mary stood in front of the guild door, blocking my exit. I couldn’t get out without passing her.

Noticing how strange I was acting, Elma elbowed me in the side. “Hiro, what the heck’s wrong with you?”

I gripped Elma and took a half step right, my eyes fixed on Mary, then extended my free hand backward to gesture to the reception desk. “We’ve finished our visit here. You came all this way, so I take it you have business at the guild. Go right ahead.”

“Real gentleman for a merc, huh?” Mary noted. “You bozos should learn from him.”

“Yes, milady,” a stern-looking man with the look of a bodyguard replied flatly.

Beneath his leather coat was a body bulging with muscles. I suspected his musculature wasn’t entirely natural; bionics or cybernetics could’ve enhanced it, after all. The man appeared rather cybernetic himself, and he looked like he’d be a strong fighter—though I doubted he could take our Mei.

“Why don’t we hang out a little longer, friend?” Mary urged. “It might be fate that we met here today.”

“Sorry, but my crew’s waiting for me. We’re booked solid.”

“Oh? Well, if you say so, I guess that’s it. I hope we meet again.”

Mary’s devious grin flattened into a faint smile as she breezed past us to the desk. The sweet scent as she walked by made my brow furrow reflexively.

“Let’s go,” I muttered.

“O-okay.”

Elma seemed oddly perturbed; no doubt my tension was evident in my tone. She and I left the guild office with the ever-calm Mei.

“Mei, tighten security around the *Black Lotus*. Use the ship’s sensors, and be extremely attentive to any and all movements.”

“Understood.”

“And dig up as much dirt on that woman as you can. I don’t want her getting a leg up on us.”

“Yes, Master. I will take care of it.”

Our disquieting exchange exasperated Elma, who tugged my jacket a little. “Hey, what’s gotten into you? You’re acting weird.”

Can’t blame you for feeling that way, can I? “It’s intuition,” I replied bluntly.

“Intuition?”

“That woman is trouble.”

“Uh...”

Obviously, it’d be silly to insist that I’d been so blunt out of something as uncertain as intuition—or so I thought. However, Elma actually understood.

“Your intuition... Don’t want to underestimate that. If nothing else, we need to be cautious. That fleet of hers...it *is* hers, isn’t it? It seems specialized for battle. I’m not sure the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* could take those ships without backup.”

“Are you nuts? We’d wipe the floor with them.”

“The *Krishna* might hold up, but the *Black Lotus* could go down if they focus those cannons on it. For all intents and purposes, that’d be losing, right?”

“That is true.”

If worse came to worst, the *Krishna* alone could shake Mary’s ships off and escape, but the *Black Lotus* was too slow for that. In short, I needed to avoid a firefight with Crimson Lance at all costs.

“This sucks,” I groaned. “They’re obviously faster than the *Black Lotus* could hope to be.”

“Their fleet is a mix of small and medium ships, after all. And the medium ones seem focused on speed and firepower.”

On the way back to the *Black Lotus*, Elma and I discussed the fleet that evidently belonged to Crimson Lance. I couldn’t identify many models or features. The vessels were either heavily modified or simply models I’d never

seen. But they all had several thrusters or unusually large main thrusters, so they were probably fast. I had the overall impression that Crimson Lance was geared toward pursuit and assault.

“If their numbers tripled,” I said, “they might even bring us down.”

“Well, I counted five medium and seven small craft. That’s about the biggest group I’ve ever seen a mercenary command.”

If Crimson Lance’s small ships suppressed the *Krishna*, and its medium ships focused their fire on the *Black Lotus*, not even that behemoth would get out unscathed. It had thick shields and plating but wasn’t maneuverable enough to dodge enemy fire.

“Enough analyzing her ships,” I said at last. “The point is, it’s too dangerous to face Crimson Lance without a plan. That much is certain.”

“Right. We don’t *know* Mary’s planning to pull anything, anyway.”

“And it wouldn’t be as easy as picking a fight.”

“No. One report, and they’d be done for.”

Edge worlds without defense fleets notwithstanding, it was extremely risky for one ship with formal ID to attack another in the Leafil System. If an attacker was reported, they had a criminal record on the spot. They then have a bounty on their head, like a space pirate.

Criminals were barred from most colonies, which meant the attacker couldn’t restock their food, water, and oxygen supplies—which obviously meant *death*. The inability to maintain their ship would also lead to it breaking down. The only avenue left would be joining space pirates and living that lifestyle.

In short, if Mary attacked us, she’d lose everything—including her status and reputation as a gold-rank mercenary.

“Well, I guess we don’t need to be too wary around her,” I concluded. “If she’s someone who’d worry about that.”

“Of course she’d worry about that,” Elma scoffed.

“I hope you’re right.”

Reporting an attacker wasn't watertight, of course. They just had to keep the report from going through, and there were plenty of ways to interfere. They could use powerful jamming measures on the battlefield, or—if they wanted to be even shrewder—perform a man-in-the-middle data attack, changing the report data into gibberish. They could even interfere with the receiver rather than the sender by, say, bringing down a colony's communication network so the report had nowhere to arrive.

These systems weren't like God watching, automatically recording any criminal acts people performed. They were manmade, so they were subject to human error. And like I said, there were plenty of ways. *Stella Online* had also had satellites, treated as illegal in-game, that jammed everything in a set range.

"For now, we stay on the ship. We're shut-ins until our landing request is approved."

"Aye aye. I just hope nothing happens."

"Honestly, I've half given up on that already."

If I'd known this would happen, I would've put off returning to the Leafil System. We should've gone to a technologically advanced system first to buy Elma's ship and my power armor... Unfortunately, it was no use acknowledging that now. All we could do was make the most of the situation and hope nothing beyond our control happened.

Returning to the *Black Lotus*, we gathered everyone in the dining hall to discuss our encounter with Captain Mary and our next moves.

"So we're lockin' ourselves up...again?"

"It's our only choice."

"Could you explain exactly how this...Mary woman is dangerous?" Mimi asked.

"Exactly? It was a subjective thing, so it's hard to explain."

How could I break down that feeling I'd had when I came face to face with Mary? Her curious and sadistic gaze, vicious smile, decadent air, demeanor like

a carnivore toying with prey—I didn't like *any* of it.

As I voiced all that, Elma nodded. "I did think she had a creepy grin. What really surprised me, though, was Hiro's sudden aloofness with a pretty lady."

"She was pretty, huh?"

"Was she?" I tried to remember. "I thought she looked kind of tacky, but I couldn't really pay attention to her appearance at the time." I recalled her flashy hair color and out-of-place clothes. Now that I thought about it, she'd worn a ton of jewelry too. I'd been too put off by her to notice anything else, though.

"Elma thought she was pretty, but hon didn't? That's surprisin'."

"Can you not act like I'm some indiscriminate horndog?"

Everyone at the table laughed or smirked at me.

Damn it. You're all so mean to me.

"Even if you're right about her," Wiska noted, "it's not as if she's done anything yet. The only way to protect ourselves would be locking ourselves in the ship."

"That's about right," said Elma. "Oh—but I don't like the thought of leaving the *Black Lotus* behind when we land on Theta. It might be a headache, but should we land at the general port instead?"

"Good thinking," I agreed. "Better adjust our descent plans."

Aside from those of us who had first-class citizenship, it wouldn't be easy for the crew to land on residential planets like Leafil IV—Theta. If we could just land on the planet, though, I could stop worrying about Captain Mary for the time being.

Tinia looked at me with interest. "This woman has you quite shaken, Sir Hiro. Why?"

"Don't try to find out for yourself by scoping her out. I get the feeling you'll regret it."

My warning prompted a sincere nod from Tinia. "Of course not. I'm not

interested in her. *You're* the one I'm curious about."

"Me?"

"Yes. Have you ever felt that sort of powerful sixth sense before?"

"I've had feelings in my bones. This is the first time it's ever been this intense, though."

I'd never in my life experienced the sensation of seeing someone and immediately labeling them my enemy. In a way, it was a fresh experience.

"That may be the magic you're best at, Sir Hiro. Though I don't know whether it would be a form of psychosensitivity or something else."

"The magic I'm best at, huh...?" Frankly, I wasn't buying it. Still, I *did* have the ability to slow the flow of time around me by holding my breath... I couldn't identify what exactly I'd felt when I saw Mary, but maybe it was the result of my magic-awakening training. "I don't think guessing about this will get us anywhere. Even Miriam couldn't figure that out, right?"

"True enough. But I'm advising you to pay special attention to that feeling. I think it'll be the seed that germinates into your magic."

"To trust my instincts, huh? Okay. I'll remember that." *The seed that germinates into my magic... Still not buying it. Tina looks serious, though, so it must be important to her.*

"Anyhow, doesn't lockin' ourselves in make us look like wimps?" Tina asked me.

"You might not like it, but what'd happen if you wandered out for fun and got kidnapped or something? If my bad gut feeling is right, our enemies have things in store for us I don't even want to imagine."

"Your gut feeling..." Realizing what I was getting at, Elma frowned. "You don't think Mary's connected to Red Flag, do you? Surely you're just being silly now. She's a gold-rank merc."

Aha. Even Elma hasn't thought this far yet. "Look, Elma, people call her the Lucky Looter. I bet she has a rep for 'luckily' scoring tons of loot from pirates or 'finding' big hoards of pirate treasure."

“Even if that’s true, maybe she has some kind of trick up her sleeve. Or really *is* just lucky. I don’t think we should decide someone’s in cahoots with pirates on a hunch.”

“Okay, okay, I’m spreading unfounded rumors and slander right now. That’s why I asked Mei to collect intel.”

Though she’d been mostly uninvolved in this conversation, Mei stood behind my chair, using her overwhelming processing speed to locate and analyze information on Captain “Lucky Looter” Mary.

“The mercenary guild isn’t stupid, you know,” Elma retorted. “They analyze all the information that comes in. If someone was suspicious, the guild wouldn’t promote them to gold rank.”

“I’ll judge for myself after I hear Mei’s analysis.”

That said, Elma had a point. The guild *wasn’t* stupid. They surely looked at your character and activities before a promotion. Actually, *did* they? I recalled climbing almost directly from bronze to platinum simply by demonstrating skills on occasion.

On the other hand, there *were* records even Serena could unearth about me dealing with pirates and crystal life-forms. There would also be Port Authority records from back when I helped Chris. The Dalenwalds would’ve formally vouched for me too, so there wouldn’t be much room to question my behavior. As for the Gold Star and the tournament, those were matters of Imperial record.

“Look, Hiro, you’re a special case.”

“Please stop reading my mind.”

“Your fault for making it so easy.”

“She’s right, Hiro.”

“Yup.”

“Yeah.”

“You guys are mean.” *What’s the deal? Can you stop ganging up on me, please?* Well, part of me realized that I was getting way too nervous. Maybe

they were just trying to reassure me. Let's go with that.

While the girls and I bantered, Mei suddenly spoke up. "Master, I have completed my investigation into Captain Mary."

"That was fast. Let's hear it."

"Yes. As you surmised, Captain Mary earned the name 'Lucky Looter' through many successful seizures of pirate assets hidden in deep space and asteroid belts. Her mercenary unit, Crimson Lance, has looted far above the average amount for mercenaries."

"People must suspect that she's colluding with space pirates, right?"

Mei nodded. "Yes. The mercenary guild seems to find her success suspicious, as there are traces of several investigations into Captain Mary. However, they have found no solid evidence against her. Furthermore, she has a strong track record of killing pirates. Crimson Lance's combined forces have killed as many pirates as yourself, Master, or perhaps even more. They have also helped locate many bases by interrogating captured pirates and analyzing recovered data caches. These achievements are likewise far beyond the average mercenary."

"So, they raise eyebrows but take pirate-hunting seriously, and people concluded that they're normal mercenaries. Is that right?"

"Yes. While they do discover abnormal quantities of pirate spoils and pirate bases, the mercenary guild has concluded that they have some special method or knowledge. Captain Mary has said as much publicly. She claims that once you master 'a trick or two,' it isn't hard to find what she finds."

"Hmm. *Is that how it works?*"

"Guess I can't outright deny that."

Stella Online had contained events in which you tracked down and claimed hidden pirate assets. You'd typically destroy a pirate ship, analyze its data cache, and obtain coordinates to where treasure was hidden. The probability of finding anything there was extremely low, though, and my perception was that making a stable profit from those events was hard.

"I don't see how anyone could consistently locate pirate hoards."

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Maybe Crimson Lance has some secret technique or special equipment to find those... But frankly, it’s likelier that they’re in cahoots with pirates.”

“If that were the case, though, surely they wouldn’t kill so many of their own,” Tina hypothesized.

“I don’t know about that,” Tina objected. “Pirates ain’t a monolith or anythin’. Maybe these mercs take out pirates that get in the way of Red Flag’s business.”

“Oh, I see! That does sound plausible.”

It made sense, all right. It was actually totally feasible that Crimson Lance’s claims that they found hidden treasure were bald-faced lies obfuscating the fact that they killed pirates they were at odds with. Or maybe their “loot” came from their pirate buddies, pure and simple. I wouldn’t have been surprised if they just received goods stolen by pirates, then fenced them through legal channels as “recovered pirate treasure.”

“Isn’t getting this suspicious of them a slippery slope? All we really know is that they found enough pirate loot and bases to arouse the mercenary guild’s suspicion, right?”

“That’s true,” I conceded. “In the end, the mercenary guild couldn’t catch them red-handed at anything... I’d really like to trust my gut at this point, though.”

It might be weird to say this, given my paranoia, but my pang of intuition had felt like divine revelation. My body and mind had wholly rejected that woman. It wasn’t every day you saw someone and immediately thought “enemy.”

“Are you sure you’re all right? Not too leery? Would you feel better if you touched my boobs?” Elma offered graciously.

“Yes, ma’am.” I instantly abandoned all thought and buried my face in her chest. *Mmm. Not as big as Mimi’s, but really nice. Elma smells good, too. Very soothing. Awesome.*

“Little too self-indulgent there, hon.”

Can you blame me? I’m red-blooded.

Despite all that talk, we hadn't come up with anything useful. I'd just have to hope that my suspicions were my imagination running away with me.

At any rate, once we landed on Theta, Crimson Lance couldn't pursue us. If all went well, even if they followed us down, they couldn't bother us much. After all, if they did, they'd be called on it quickly. Compared to the vast expanse of space, planetary atmospheres were tiny. If you fired laser cannons powerful enough to damage a ship, the local star system fleet in charge of protecting the planet would turn up immediately.

In the end, we couldn't leave the ship today, and we wouldn't be leaving the colony without permission to land. Thus, I spent the day lazing around and hanging out with my girls in the *Black Lotus*.

The next day, we relaxed on the lounge couch, basking in the languid atmosphere. Mimi sat in my lap, using me as a backrest. Tinia snuggled on my right side, and the twins pressed up close on my left. Mei stood behind the couch, hugging my neck. The soft mounds touching my head were nice.

"You must all be hot over there." Elma rolled her eyes at us. She was busy day-drinking across the room.

"I'm just fine," I replied.

"I am cooling Master comfortably." Indeed, Mei's frame felt enjoyably chilly against my neck and head. She was apparently using her cooling system to the fullest. That was my perfect maid for you; she could do things that even maids normally couldn't.

If you're wondering why we'd all curled up together like this, we were watching retro movies bundled on data chips I'd bought. This particular chip had a bunch of old horror movies. Earlier, we'd sat in a row normally, but we'd ended up huddling together.

The movie playing at the moment was a suspense thriller in which the crew aboard a hyperlane-traveling spaceship were murdered one by one. They suspected each other, and each time someone died, they held a vote to expel the crew member they thought had committed the murder.

Naturally, being expelled into a hyperlane was fatal. Well, nobody would know *exactly* what happened to you; you'd go missing and never be found.

"The culprit's gotta be Blue. That guy's tryin' way too hard to prove it ain't him!"

"Hmm...seems like Green to me. Blue was working with Black last time someone was killed, right? He couldn't possibly have committed the last murder."

"Black is suspicious. Ever since they kicked Purple out, Black has been so aggressive about reducing the number of crew on board."

"Yeah, Black seems to be trying really hard to get rid of everyone else. They hid Black's mouth when Purple was kicked off, but it looked like Black was smiling about it."

"You notice the subtlest things, Sir Hiro..."

"Welp, I have no idea what's going on."

"That's because you're already drunk."

Blue, Green, and Black were characters—or rather, characters' codenames or call signs. The monikers made them easier to remember, since they all wore clothes that matched their names.

Mei didn't join in the speculation. If she seriously analyzed what was going on, she'd figure out the culprit in no time.

At the end of the movie, the passengers thought they'd kicked the traitor out of the ship, but another one actually remained. The final scene showed the surviving traitor killing a passenger right in front of us before closing in on the final survivors.

"Wow! There were *two* culprits?"

"You were pretty much right, Sir Hiro. Black was a killer."

"I really liked the bleakness of it. They figure out the obvious culprit, Green; finally defeat him after a long action sequence; and bam! They hit you with the twist."

“It was so awful watching them lose friends one by one. The way the people being expelled begged for their lives was almost terrifyingly realistic.”

“Imagine if that happened for real.”



“Hey, cut it out. That’s scary.”

This isn’t a snuff film, girls. But hell, this universe’s filmmaking equipment is so advanced, I can almost imagine this movie captured things that really happened. These credits make it more like just a movie, though... Oh, man. I love it when credits show outtakes!

“What’s the next film again?” Tinia asked.

“Uh...” I read the title aloud. “*Terror! Space Spider!*”

“Sounds like a B...no, a C-movie,” said Tina.

“We won’t know until we watch it, Sis.”

“Ugh.” Mimi shuddered. “I can’t handle creepy crawlies...”

“I remember you screamed when you saw that graa,” Elma said.

She was referring to a giant insect indigenous to Leafil IV. It was about the size of a snake and moved at ridiculous speeds on countless legs. Though it looked gross and scary, it didn’t bite humans or elves. In fact, graas actively hunted venomous creatures, so they were beneficial. Honestly, though, I couldn’t stand them either.

The space-spider flick started as a horror movie, but quickly transformed into a heartwarming story about a human and a space spider who fell in love despite differences. The scene where the hero sacrificed themselves to protect the space spider from their crew was surprisingly touching.

Ultimately, every character except the hero died, and the love between the main character and the spider “crystallized” in the main character’s body. What would happen when that “crystal” thing hatched?

“I’m going to have nightmares about that...”

“True love, I guess?”

“In a way...?”

“Maybe, but it’s not right for love to hurt so many people.”

“Agreed.”

“It was a fascinating work.”

Please, Mei. I don't like you saying that.

“Master, we have received permission to land from the Leafil System government.”

“Oh? That was fast. All right, shall we get to it?”

The government had seemingly granted permission without issue, although we'd changed plans rather suddenly, asking to park the *Black Lotus* at the general port facility. We'd decided that dispersing would be too dangerous; we had Mary to worry about, after all. I doubted she'd try anything directly under the circumstances, but she might throw an unexpected curveball. Having the *Black Lotus* on hand would be safest.

“I still feel like you're being too cautious,” Elma said.

“If this turns out to be nothing but unnecessary anxiety, fine by me. Or, hell, maybe they'll see how wary we are and give up the chase.”

The problem with landing at the general port was that the Grald and Minpha Clans might bother us. That wouldn't be a serious issue, though. We were here to return Tinia and the sacred tree seed, then visit the Willrose family. If we were insistent about that, surely the other Clans would leave us alone. Well, hopefully. Maybe.

Chapter 8:

He Who Runs Away

“ENTERING LEAFIL IV’S ORBIT,” Mei informed us from the *Black Lotus* cockpit.

“Our landing target is the Minpha Clan territory’s general port. As we enter the atmosphere, be especially watchful for attacks from orbit and beyond,” I instructed.

“Aye aye.”

I stood by in the *Krishna*’s cockpit so that we could launch at a moment’s notice, using my idle time to scrutinize the *Black Lotus*’s plentiful sensor data.

The larger ship’s sensors picked up a small vessel with mercenary guild affiliation moving along satellite orbit at high speed. On closer inspection, it was a Crimson Lance recon ship, just as I expected. Elma, Mimi, and I spoke up in unison.

“They’re here.”

“Definitely here.”

“They’re really here...”

Of course, the fact that we’d spotted them must’ve meant Mei spotted them as well. In fact, the Crimson Lance ship showed no sign of hiding—probably abandoning the idea of stealth, since there was nowhere to hide in satellite orbit.

“Looks to me like a high-speed recon ship for electronic warfare,” I said.

Elma agreed. “I think you’re right, based on the shape.”

“You can tell from the shape?” Mimi asked us.

“To an extent. The craft looks small and light, but it has two main engines. On the other hand, it doesn’t have many attitude control thrusters, so it’s not specialized for combat. It’s for direct travel—rushing where it needs to at high

speed, then fleeing as soon as anything goes south. See those weird protrusions all over the hull? They're additional sensor arrays."

"It's easy to identify at a glance," I added. "The radome shapes are all the same."

Spaceships were typically protected by shields, but fragile sensors left exposed were likely to degrade. Safeguarding them with radomes was vital. If you wanted lots of sensor arrays, though, you had to cover your ship in radomes, leaving it kind of...ugly.

Mimi and Tinia listened to our explanation in amazement. It was the kind of knowledge that only came from plenty of experience and seeing lots of ships.

"I guessed that vessel was a decoy to lower our guard, but I don't see anything likely to attack nearby."

"No. If they attacked here, star system fleet ships in geostationary orbit would be here in no time."

"But if they wanted to shoot us and didn't care about the repercussions, this would be an opportunity, wouldn't it?" Mimi asked.

"If they were willing to get themselves killed in the process, sure," I replied. "I wonder what pretext that ship had for entering orbit."

"Who knows?" Elma replied. "It could be formal security support for the star system fleet."

"Ooh. That *would* be one way."

Maybe that was why Mary had gone to the mercenary guild the day before. She had high-speed recon aircraft specializing in electronic warfare; it was very possible she'd offered them to help defend Leafil IV. If she offered a low-price trial run, the star system fleet might even have accepted. After letting pirates attempt drop raids on their planet twice now, they'd do whatever it took to avoid that happening again.

"That might actually be it, Elma. It doesn't look like that ship followed us from Leafil Prime."

"Well, whatever its reason for being there, we can't be the ones to attack

first.”

“All we can do is ignore them.”

I didn’t know how advanced the ship’s intel-gathering technology was, but I couldn’t do anything about it. Neither the *Black Lotus* nor the *Krishna* could land in stealth mode, so the Crimson Lance ship would know exactly where we touched down, even if we moved the *Krishna* to Rosé Clan territory. But there was just no way for me to solve this problem; if I tried to, we would be the ones in trouble.

“Master, we have reached entry trajectory. In two minutes, we will descend into the atmosphere.”

“Roger that. I think we’ll be fine, but just in case, stay on guard.”

“Please leave it to me,” Mei responded.

Not long after, the *Black Lotus* entered the atmosphere. The heat of adiabatic compression formed plasma on the ship’s shields, emitting powerful light.

“So pretty,” Mimi remarked casually.

“R-really? It’s a little scary to me.” Tinia had stiffened in nervousness.

Having seen my share of things burn up and explode on atmospheric entry, I was more uneasy than impressed. But I didn’t want to refute the innocent sensibilities of someone who did find it beautiful, so I gave a token response.

“Mimi has bizarre sensibilities at times, doesn’t she?”

“Huh?! ”

Elma’s heartless comment shocked Mimi to tears. I could almost hear the *dun-dun-duuun* sound effect. But I’d thought the same thing as Elma, despite not saying it myself, so I couldn’t blame her. *I’ll just keep quiet now.*

“Master, atmospheric entry is complete. Decelerating as we approach the target landing zone. Approximately thirty minutes until arrival.”

Thirty whole minutes, huh? Shields reduce air resistance, and anti-gravity mechanisms cancel out our weight, but you still can’t go anywhere near as fast in atmosphere as in space. “Got it. Thanks for piloting. We’ll stand by in the

Krishna.”

“Understood. I will contact Miss Tina and Miss Wiska as well.”

“Thanks.”

Mei hung up from the cockpit. She’d started calling the twins “Miss” at some point. I was pretty sure she hadn’t done that before, and I couldn’t remember when she started doing it. Maybe when she began, she was already certain the twins and I would end up in a sexual relationship.

“Now that I think about it,” I reflected, “maybe sending Tinia home should’ve been our *first* order of business.”

“Am I a burden...?” Tinia looked stricken, which flustered me.

“No, not because of that. It just feels like, if we have an important young woman in our care, we ought to prioritize seeing her home. In general.” *No tears, please. You’re making me look like a bad guy.*

“No need to rush things,” Elma interjected. “We still don’t know the situation, and we’ll be killing time on Theta for a while anyway, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

If that ominous gold-ranked woman gave up and left while we relaxed on Theta, all the better. It’d be great to avoid trouble that easily. For now, our plan was to lift off in the *Krishna* and beeline for Rosé Clan territory as soon as the *Black Lotus* landed. There, we’d meet the Willrose family. Our flight schedule and hotel arrangements were already taken care of. It was a relief to let Mimi handle all that.

Tina requested entry from outside the hatch. “*Hon*, let me in!”

“Yeah, yeah. One sec.” I quickly opened the hatch.

When I did, Tina barreled into the cockpit with a bulky object, yelling, “Sorry to bug ya, hon!”

“If you want to bug me, then bug *off*,” I said, quoting a one-liner from back home.

Tina played along. “Okay, bye! Hey, wait a minute!”

Wow, someone in this universe gets that joke?

“S-Sis, please don’t be a bother...”

“How do you know downtown dwarf jokes, hon?”

“That joke is basically common knowledge.”

“Common knowledge...?” Wiska gawked at me, utterly confused.

Having figured out where I knew the joke from, Elma glared. *Yes, yes. It’s humor from my old world. I thought it’d go over their heads.*

“What did you just haul in here?” I asked the twins.

“This? It’s the two-seater sub-seat.”

“Oh, yeah. That old rush job?”

“We modified it to improve comfort and safety.”

Whipping out tools, the twins swiftly swapped the current sub-seat for the two-seater that accommodated a pair of dwarves. They rarely use tools on something directly, but they sure were good at it. As they finished switching the seats and threw the original sub-seat into storage, Mei’s voice came over comms again.

“In five minutes, we will land at the general port. Please brace for a slight impact.”

“Got it. Be careful.”

“Yes, Master. You may rest assured of that.”

I could leave landing to Mei without anxiety. For the moment, all I had to do was ensure everyone fastened their seat belts.

“Thank you for waiting,” Mei said.

“No, thank *you* for piloting the *Black Lotus*. Now you get to enjoy my flying.”

“Yes. I look forward to it.”

Mei stood beside the sub-seat where the twins sat. With her abilities, she didn’t even need a seat belt—though since she was by far the heaviest of us, if

she *did* go flying from an impact, we were in big trouble.

“Mimi, send a takeoff request to air traffic control.”

“Aye aye!” Mimi submitted our request.

This process was typically the same as applying for colony entry or departure, but with a stricter time window. To be fair, there was much less airspace here than in outer space, and gravity added an extra factor. It was dangerous to ignore air traffic rules, especially during takeoff and landing. Still, aircraft made with modern technology generally had low-output shields, which greatly cut down on accidents due to external factors like bird strikes and wing ice.

Oh, that aircraft that crashed? It was made using psionic, not aeronautic, technology. Hopefully they’d use that crash to improve safety, though.

“This is air traffic control. *Krishna*, you may launch. Please follow the guide beacons.”

“Roger that. *Krishna* launching.” Following instructions, I eased the *Krishna* out of the *Black Lotus*’s back hatch. All I had to do was follow the guide beacons on my main screen, so it was easy. “Mimi, activate *Black Lotus* locks and shields.”

“Aye aye. Hatch locked and shields activated.”

“Mei, I’m leaving the *Black Lotus* to you. If anything happens, alert me immediately.”

“Yes. Please entrust it to me.”

I doubted anyone on Theta would mess with the *Black Lotus*, but you never knew. Whenever we were away for a while, we had to be careful about security.

“Ooh! The surface scenery is so vibrant compared to space!”

“Probably because there are things to see both above and below.”

As the twins chattered in the sub-seat, I followed the guide beacons out of the port’s air traffic control area. From this point on, we had a certain freedom. There were still speed and altitude limits, of course. The *Krishna* could cruise at easily double the speed of sound; if we flew that fast near ground level,

shockwaves would ruin the surface.

“How long till we get there again?”

“At cruise speed, just under two hours,” Elma replied. “It’s about a five-thousand-kilometer flight, I think.”

“Five thousand kilometers... Putting it that way is a reminder of just how big planets are.”

“Yeah. Much bigger than any colony.”

Colonies came in all shapes and sizes, but even giant mega-colonies only had populations of up to a million. Oversized communities were harder to supply and manage, so most colonies in the Grakkan Empire housed under half a million.

Most of the colonies we visited on our travels through space were focused on trading, but there were also colonies focused on mining, research and development, and agriculture, as well as other communities, such as garrisons for star system fleets and the Imperial Fleet. Any given star system contained diverse colonies—we just didn’t visit most unless we needed to.

Anyway, outer-space colonies just couldn’t sustain huge populations. That was why galactic empires fought over habitable planets and explored the far reaches of outer space—so-called “edge worlds”—to expand their territory. Since the terraforming efforts led by Chris and the Dalenwalds would directly increase the Grakkan Empire’s influence, the Empire had paid them a lot of attention. They’d even sent the Imperial Fleet to help secure new livable planets, indicating how important the project was to them.

Why did the Empire bother establishing colonies in space, given the low population density? That was because bringing harvested materials all the way to a planet’s surface to process, then sending them *back* into space, was extremely inefficient. You could instead collect materials in outer space, secure energy through efficient solar power, and then process the materials—all without setting foot on a planet. On top of that, ships were easier to build in low or zero gravity.

That was all I knew. I’d heard that with the development of new construction

techniques, hyperdrive technology, the gateway network, and so on, they could now work on super-massive colonies as big as star systems for vast numbers of inhabitants.

Grakkan Empire elites were apparently torn between covering existing residential planets with structures like the capital's to make more ecumenopolises, proceeding with research of superstructures that could span entire star systems, securing habitable planets to expand their territory, terraforming planets already within their sphere of influence, and similar options.

Back when I'd casually looked into this while relaxing in the *Black Lotus* lounge, Mei came out of nowhere and explained it all to me. She had an odd way of appearing just in time to tell me about things I was looking up. I'm sure you can imagine why, but I'd avoided thinking about it further, opting not to probe too deeply. I wasn't about to rock the boat for the fun of it. Surely Mei was just watching over me, not *surveilling* me. Interpreting it that way was one strategy for maintaining my fragile sanity.

We chatted idly over the course of the two-hour flight until the *Krishna* arrived safely at the central airport in Rosé Clan territory.

"Something about the atmosphere here is completely different from the Minpha and Grald holdings," Tinia mused.

"Yeah. It's full of skyscrapers, after all. It's not like there's *no* greenery, but it's perfectly maintained, like everything else."

I followed the central airport's air traffic control commands, landing the *Krishna* in our designated spot. Autodocking was again a huge help. If you switched it on once you reached an air traffic area, the ship parked for you automatically as soon as you'd received permission to do so.

"What now?"

"I've contacted the Willrose family heads," Elma replied. "They're sending someone to pick us up."

"Ooh! Your family's real nice, Elma. I feel like a VIP!"

"Pretty sure we actually *are* VIPs," I muttered. There were a lot of reasons,

but the biggest ones would be that we'd rescued Tinia and the others, found the sacred tree seed, fought off Red Flag... I mean, that was a *lot* of reasons. "We're dealing with Elma's family, so it's okay to relax a little, but let's not be rude. That said, I think everyone got along well, so there's probably no need to worry."

"You sure got along with Salma."

"Oh, the little one!" Mimi piped up. "She's just adorable, isn't she?"

"You call her little, Mimi, but she's about the same age as you. Maybe even a little older."

Salma was one of the Willrose family kids, so she was an elf. She was about as short as Tina and Wiska, and her body looked delicate as a twig; she was a lot lighter than the two dwarves of equivalent height. Despite her childlike appearance as an elf, it felt weird to call an eighteen-year-old a "little girl." After all, people became adults at age fifteen in the Grakkan Empire.

"You're kidding, right...?" Mimi said.

"I'm serious."

"Hon, weren't you lettin' her sit in your lap and pettin' her?!"

"I do the same thing with you and Wiska, don't I?"

"True..."

Wow, you calmed down awfully fast. Wasn't it normal to let an eighteen-year-old girl sit in your lap, stroke her hair, tickle her, goof around with her, and... Oh. That *wasn't* normal. Since Salma looked so young and cute, I hadn't noticed, but that was actually really bad, huh?

"It don't count!" Tina protested once more. "She's a kid!"

"Imperial law says she's an adult."

While we argued, the autodocking feature parked us perfectly in our spot. All we had to do now was get ready to disembark. We planned to stay a few days, so we had things we needed to bring with us.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

When we left the *Krishna*, Liliu—the Rosé Clan elf who’d guided us during our last visit—welcomed us.

“Oh. Hi, Liliu.”

“You seem less...*prepared* this time,” Liliu muttered, observing my luggage carefully.

On this visit, I had only a single carry-on bag containing stuff like clothes and backup energy packs, not a giant bag stuffed with a survival kit and a non-perishable food supply.

“Well, now you’re making me think I should’ve been better prepared.”

“Enough. You know, I was almost demoted because of that.” Liliu’s fingers made an “X” over her chest.

I don’t care whether you get demoted... Okay, I do care a little, but it’s not like it’s our fault it crashed. I feel like I share some blame in a very distant, indirect way, but I didn’t know anything about my weird superpowers back then.

“The Rosé Clan punishing you would be tantamount to their admitting fault,” Elma said. “It wouldn’t be beneficial.”

Hearing our exchange with Liliu, followed by Elma’s remark, Tinia looked anxious. “Given my position, I suppose I should stay quiet...”

Before we’d crashed in the Grald Clan’s aircraft, the Rosé Clan had brought up concerns about its safety and suggested we travel by normal small ship instead. It had turned out that they were right. The Grald aircraft only had a low-output shield and minimal communication abilities at best. It was also fragile due to its emphasis on lightness, giving rise to a nasty combination of problems when it eventually crashed.

After news of the crash spread, the Rosé Clan had attempted a swift search-and-rescue operation using small spaceships. But the Grald Clan, which fiercely hated science and technology, thwarted their plans. Anyway, after a bunch of complications, my crew had gotten pissed off and rescued Tinia and me in the *Krishna*.

Their poor response was the real problem. After all, we'd been on our way to Grald Clan territory for VIP treatment; it was then of all times that the cabin section of our craft crashed and left us stranded. Then petty elf squabbles had delayed the rescue and finally my crew had saved us. No matter what, that was a problem of liability.

Of course, the Rosé Clan blamed the Grald Clan for insisting on the unsafe aircraft *and* the Minpha Clan for backing them up. Meanwhile, the other two clans insisted that Lilium of the Rosé Clan was at fault for abandoning us at the crash site.

That was obviously a reach, though. Other portions of the plane had been damaged back then, and Hyshe of the Minpha Clan was piloting anyway. He hadn't known how long he could keep the craft airborne, so his only choice was to land at the nearest Grald Clan settlement and report the accident.

The Rosé Clan had presumably denied the other clans' attempt at fault-finding and declared that Lilium did nothing wrong. Thus, the Rosé chieftain couldn't have gotten rid of her, lest he create a PR nightmare. That would mean Lilium had kept her job by the skin of her teeth.

"How have relations between clans gone since then?" I asked.

"As cold as the depths of space. Things have been especially...touchy with Grald Clan leadership."

"Then, hey, could you not involve us in clan infighting that has nothing to do with us?"

"It's all right," Lilium assured me. "I say things are 'touchy,' but that's really just between leadership. And even when they meet face to face, they mostly just hurl abuses at each other with smiles. They only *occasionally* scrap."

"That sounds...pretty bad already."

"Better than wet works!" Tina remarked disconcertingly.

Wet works...? Are you a gang member or something?

"It will be easiest for us to work with the Rosé Clan," Mei declared. "Miss Elma shares blood with them, and their views on technology align with ours."

Of the three elven clans, the Rosé Clan was most advanced, emphasizing the active use of technology and promoting space travel. You could call them pro-Empire. They invested their efforts into interstellar diplomacy and defending the Leafil System. That naturally led to their controlling commerce with other star systems and interactions with the Grakkan Empire, making them the richest of the three clans. They got along poorly with the Grald Clan, which treasured connections with the spirits, tradition, magic, and faith. Their relationship with the centrist Minpha Clan wasn't great either, since the current Minpha leader leaned toward magic.

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Elma agreed. "In terms of their sensibilities, they're the most like your average Imperial citizen."

"Yeah... No offense to Tinia, but you're not wrong," I said. "Getting along with people who are allergic to technology is a little tough. Zesh seems okay once you get to know him, but otherwise..." I hadn't interacted much with the Minpha Clan, so I couldn't assess them conclusively. Their leader, Miriam, was surprisingly eccentric, but her son was a perfectly normal guy.

"I prepared transportation, so please come with me. It's a luxurious vehicle reserved for high-ranking guests."

"Ooh! Hear that, hon? The VIP treatment! I bet we'll get to drink wine in a nice big limo or somethin'!"

"Someone's been watching too many holo-movies. Also—what? Are you trying to get drunk right away?"

"It's cool! Dwarves can guzzle wine like grape juice!"

"I don't think that's what he means..." Wiska murmured.

That's absolutely not "cool"—it's a problem! Also, Wiska sounds worried, but she sure looks excited. She can't hoodwink me; I see that little grin.

"I'd like gourmet sweets..." Mimi sighed.

Okay, Mimi, I think you've gone a little overboard with your glutton schtick lately. You look way too happy. But feel free to stuff your face and get plumper for me—I'm sure you can envision where.

“They’re certainly excited,” Liliun chuckled.

“I guess they need to blow off steam after being cooped up aboard the ship so long,” I sighed.

“Maybe so. Anyway, we’d better not keep the clan waiting too long, don’t you think?”

“True. Let’s go, Mei.”

“Yes, Master.”

We did our best to hurry the excited Mimi, Tina, and Wiska out of the airport. I had no experience with long-distance travel in a classy surface vehicle—I’d only used the *Krishna* and the high-speed rail back at the capital—so I was a little excited myself.

“This is what surface transportation is like, huh?” I mused.

We’d boarded what you might call a hovercar. It was about the size of a large truck, a fair bit smaller than the *Krishna*. But its interior was super plush, like a lounge at an expensive hotel. It contained comfortable L-shaped seats that could accommodate three of us in a row, as well as a bar that served drinks, snacks, and fresh fruit. It seemed to be totally self-driving.

“Riding one of these is a rare experience,” Elma confirmed. “I hear people often get around in the city in them, though.”

“What about outside the city?” Mimi asked.

“In areas without automated driving systems, we usually drive manual vehicles with pilot seats like those in spaceships,” said Liliun. “Vehicles that traverse both land and air, mostly.”

“I see.” Nodding along to Liliun’s explanation, I sampled some sweets Mimi had recommended. Oh—what were the twins doing? They’d already started downing the hovercar bar’s bottles of fine wine. *I’ll just let them do their thing.*

“Master?”

“What’s up?”

“What do you plan to do about that?” Mei looked at the top-tier troublemaker—the sacred tree seed.

“Return it to the elves, of course. Why not?”

“I see. If that is your judgment, I’m sure it is for the best.”

“Did you have something else in mind?”

“Yes. I believe that the seed’s presence bolsters and amplifies your psionic powers. Keeping it in your possession is a possibility. However, I worry that doing so could lead to a deep rift between the elves of the Leafil System.”

Hunh. Now that she mentions it, keeping the seed around longer probably would strengthen my mysterious powers. “Absolutely not,” I decided. “There’s no way that’d end well. We’re returning that thing to the elves, along with Tinia.”

“We would certainly prefer that,” muttered Liliun, who’d listened to our conversation, heaving a sigh of relief. If I decided to take that seed and never come back, it would be a massive problem for the Leafil System’s elves, especially those who worshiped spirits.

The Rosé Clan seemed to emphasize spirit worship comparatively less, but it was still part of their culture’s backbone. If an outsider like me and a girl from the Rosé Clan took the very symbol of the elves’ faith away from them, the Rosé Clan—especially the Willrose family—would be ruined. No way was that seed worth the risk.

“We’ve almost reached the clan’s assembly hall,” Liliun said.

“Gotcha. Girls, it’s about time you put the drinks away.” I snatched a wine bottle out of the complaining Tina’s hand, preparing to climb out of the car. *Okay, first off, we’ll greet the Willroses... Wait. Did she say “assembly hall”?*

Chapter 9:

Theta Revisited

LILIUM TOOK US to the clan assembly hall—a magnificent skyscraper. On its first floor, we passed the elevator and strode into a sort of conference room. A massive meeting table was set in the middle, like one you’d see in news footage of world leaders meeting. At the far end of the table sat elves in expensive-looking formalwear; they were all beautiful, naturally.

“I’m Nazarus Li Rosé, honorary baron and chieftain of the Rosé Clan. Although I have a title, it’s only ceremonial. I’d appreciate if you’d treat me as a friend.”

“Much appreciated. I’m Captain Hiro. Thanks for setting aside precious time for us.” At the Baron’s urging, I sat, asking, “By the way, what kind of gathering is this? When Lilium brought us here, we didn’t expect to meet you face to face.” We’d come to visit Elma’s family and sightsee around the Rosé territory. Our schedule definitely hadn’t included meeting the Rosé Clan chieftain.

The baron laughed heartily. “You certainly speak without fear. I like you, platinum-rank mercenary. The Willrose family informed me of your visit. Please refrain from holding it against them; make no mistake, it’s their duty to report to the chieftain when they have visitors from outside. They just fulfilled that duty; I’m the one who muscled in to set up this meeting.”

“I see. Go on,” I urged him. If this had been an order from above, the Willrose family couldn’t have declined. The Rosé Clan chieftain was at the zenith of their faction, which entailed overpowering bureaucratic authority.

“Well, I want to apologize to you—including for having forced my way into things. We’ve certainly...certainly caused you a lot of trouble unfairly.” Baron Nazarus’s eyes suddenly had a distant look. *Man. I get that you’ve had a hard time, but you’re wasting that pretty face, buddy.* “Anyway, I wanted the chance to voice that to you. Sorry it had to take place in such a ham-fisted manner.”

He bowed; the other elves in the conference room bowed in unison. Baron Nazarus was right that he’d given a pretty pushy apology, but I appreciated his

willingness to do so, and to prove its sincerity with a bow. To an extent.

“I accept your apology. Though I can’t tell you if that’ll change my impression of Thetan elves much.”

“That’s understandable. Either way, I appreciate being forgiven. The Rosé Clan will cover your expenses during your stay, so enjoy yourself out here.”

“You might want to think twice about picking up a merc crew’s tab. I’ve been told we’re spendthrifts, and we’re going to hang around for a while.”

“If it’s costly to atone, so be it.” He shrugged casually and smiled.

Well, the Rosé Clan is supposedly loaded. Maybe spending wildly won’t drain their wallets. Might as well take him up on the offer.

“Now, I think this meeting has been productive enough, and I wouldn’t want to get in the way of our guests’ plans,” Baron Nazarus concluded. “Captain Hiro, I’ll have Lilium continue to guide you. If you have any requests, convey them to me via her.”

I looked at Lilium. She bowed with flawless composure. I certainly appreciated having someone we were acquainted with as our guide; she already knew what interested us.

“We’ll gladly accept your hospitality,” I assured Baron Nazarus.

As we left the clan gathering hall, a pretty, silver-haired male elf greeted me. “Thank you for coming, my boy. Hiro, correct?” Based on his hair color, he was from the Rosé Clan. And based on the way he’d addressed me...

“Pleasure to meet you. I’m guessing you’re from the Willrose family?”

“Ah, yes. We haven’t met in person, have we? Apologies. I’ve heard so much about you from my wife and sisters. They just love showing me holo-videos of you. I’m Neusch, head of the Willrose household. A pleasure.”

Mr. Neusch offered his hand, so I shook it. All elves lacked facial hair and looked young and beautiful, so frankly, guessing his age was impossible. If he was the head of the Willroses, he was probably pretty old...even if he didn’t look the part.

“Yeah, I’m Hiro,” I confirmed. “I appreciate your family taking care of us a few days ago.”

He laughed. “They loved you. I’m told some weren’t quite acting their ages, so I hope they weren’t a bother.”

“No, not at all. They treated us very well.”

“Glad to hear that. Ah, by the way, we did come to pick you up. I just didn’t expect *someone* would kidnap our guests.” Neusch turned his sharp gaze to Lilium. She paled, cheeks twitching.

Oof. He’s pretty intimidating. Just then, I remembered that every man in the Willrose family served in the military. I backed Lilium up. “Um...well, I’m sure she had orders from her superiors. Give her a break, okay?”

“Hmm. Really? If you say so, I’ll just have to forgive her. I’m sure Nazarus was at fault anyway. Next time I see him, I’ll give him a piece of my mind. And maybe a good, square kick in the shin.” Neusch frowned up at the gathering hall.

Yeah, those eyes are serious. Better not make this guy mad, or I’ll be in trouble.

“Now, I don’t believe I invited anyone other than Hiro’s party...”

“Right,” Lilium said quickly, then told us, “I’ll be here in the morning to pick you all up.”

“We actually mean to host them through tomorrow onward,” Neusch corrected her. “But all right. I understand you have a reputation to uphold.”

“Thank you. Well, Sir Hiro, I suppose that concludes our business for today.”

“Yeah. Thanks for your help.”

Lilium bowed to us and left. You might’ve called it a strategic retreat. She wouldn’t leave us entirely to the Willrose family; she knew how to take the initiative.

“Now, Hiro, please get in. Your lovely companions already boarded.”

“Thanks in advance for helping us out.”

If Elma and Mei got into Neusch's vehicle willingly, there was surely no need for me to worry. Neusch showed me to a land-air vehicle even bigger and bulkier than Lilium's VIP hovercar.

Yeah, really, this is massive. Is it a military vehicle or something?

When I got in, the interior was surprisingly ordinary...kind of like a tour bus, actually. The last vehicle had been more like a classy limousine, but this wasn't bad.

Mimi waved from the back. "Master Hiro!" The others around her had all frozen up.

Uh, why are there so many girls? I didn't get here with this many.

"Hiro! It's been a while!"

"Captain Hiro! Over here! Sit with me!"

"Oh..."

It looked like all the Willrose women had tagged along, including the young elf Salma. I didn't even ask why; they'd clearly come to pick us up. Had they really needed to come all this way and invade the assembly hall together? Whatever.

I obligingly sat with Salma, who was panting audibly. She immediately climbed into my lap. *Come on. You're eighteen.*

"Salma really likes you, Hiro," one of the women chuckled.

"There's a comfortable seat!"

I didn't mind obliging Salma, but Mimi sure didn't look happy about it. I had to wonder if she was stuck on the fact that Salma was older than her. Mimi was used to Tina and Wiska, but this was apparently different.

"So...why exactly did everyone come to pick us up?" I asked.

"Does it bother you?"

"N-no, I'm indifferent. Just wondering."

I couldn't relax around this motley crew of elven ladies. They smelled nice too, so it was a real assault on my senses of both sight *and* smell.

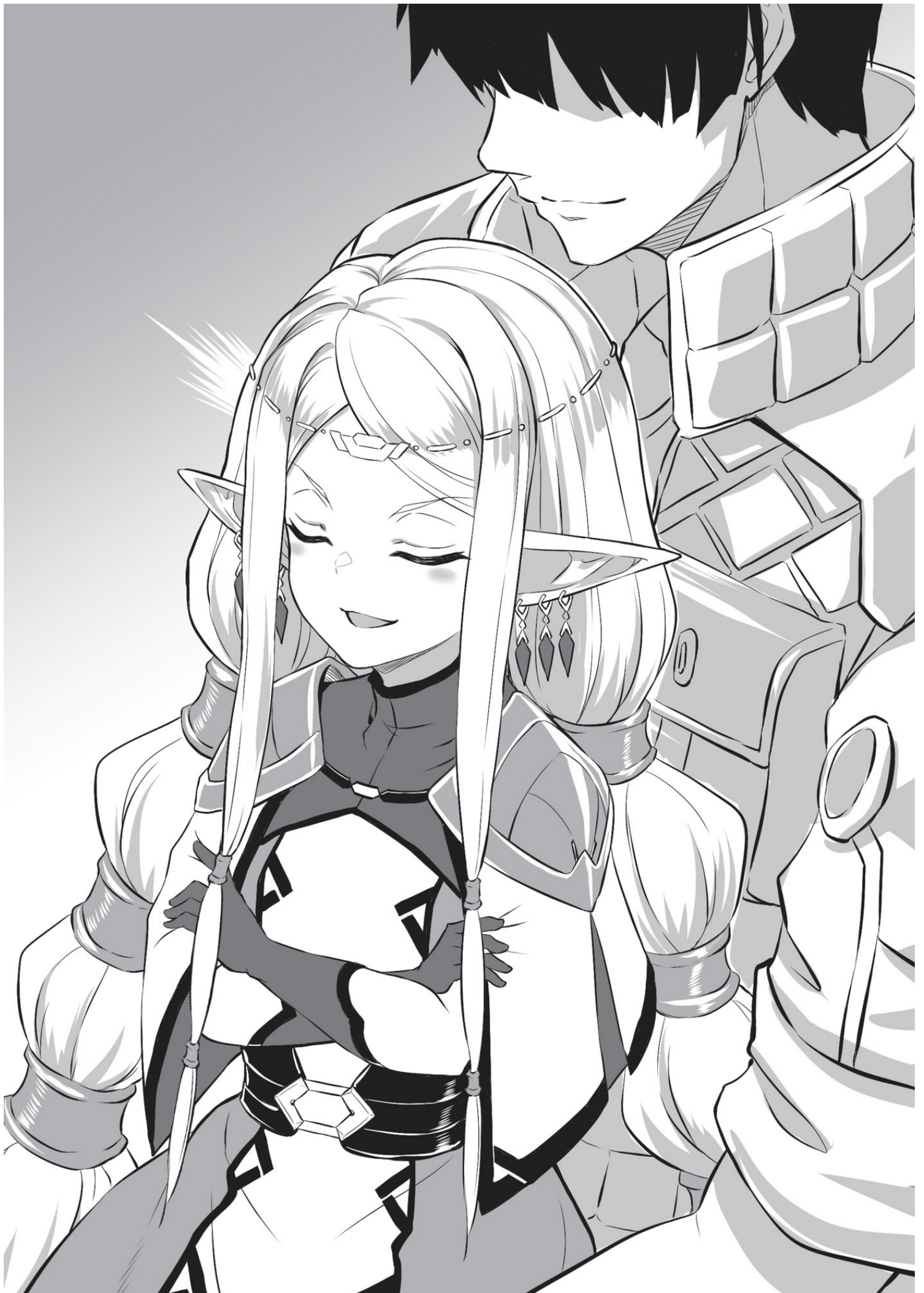
“Now, now, enough teasing. Hiro might seem as young as Salma from our perspective, but in his culture he’s an adult.” Saving me from the circling vultures, Neusch lifted Salma out of my lap easily. I felt both relieved and embarrassed. “Sorry about them. They don’t get many opportunities to interact with outsiders, so they tend to treat humans like other elves.”

“I really don’t think you can say I’m as young as *her*,” I protested, looking at Salma, who was still in his arms. She cocked her head as if she didn’t understand.

“Isn’t ten years’ difference negligible?”

“Maybe for long-lived races like elves.”

Humans definitely wouldn’t see an eighteen-year-old and someone pushing thirty as almost the same age. But to elves, who lived for hundreds of years, maybe a decade was nothing.



“Well, to Salma and the other girls, you’re... Forgive my rudeness, but you’re essentially still a child.”

“That’s real culture shock,” I admitted.

Now that I thought about it, the Willroses even treated Elma almost like a kid; she was about twice my age. At what point were you an adult by elven standards? Eighty? A hundred? I didn’t think Elma had ever specified.

While I chatted with Salma, Neusch, and the Willrose men, we arrived at their family home. The vehicle landed and stopped so gently that I almost didn’t feel it; they must’ve had a heck of a driver.

The moment I got out, Salma leaped onto my back from behind. “Captain Hiro! Fly to the party venue!”

“Yes, ma’am...”

I didn’t want her wringing my neck, which forced me to give her a piggyback ride. Oh, you want to know whether I felt any boobs or butt? Not really, not even worth comparing to the mechanics’. There was just no thickness there.

“Jeez,” Elma complained. “You two are awfully close.”

Mimi groaned, and half-annoyed, half-jealous gazes rained upon me courtesy of my crew.

“Maybe hon can give me a piggyback ride later,” Tina mused.

“He can hold me in his arms!” Wiska chimed in.

“Yes. I request to be carried like a bride,” Mei added.

“Later. Later, I’ll do whatever you want. But Mei, will you please settle for a hug?”

Mei’s request in particular was a bridge too far. She weighed over a hundred kilograms, so carrying her that way would shatter my hips.

Tinia also came in for harassment from the Willrose women.

“Are you sure you don’t likewise have a request for Hiro, Tinia?”

“No, I...”

“Might as well go all in rather than regretting your diffidence later, right?”

“Please, really...”

Hey, quit trying to light a fire under her. Don't make her “go all in” or whatever other scary thing you're pushing. If I mess up and sleep with her, things will get bad real fast.

“Giddyap!” Salma's tiny hands smacked my shoulders.

“Yeah, yeah...” *What am I, a horse?*

“Now, Salma...” Neusch watched us with oddly sad eyes.

Is Salma actually his daughter? If so, her status is similar to Tinia's. That doesn't mean I can suddenly start acting frosty with her now, though. She'd cry if I did, and if she cried, I'd be the bad guy for sure. This fake-child elf had performed a pretty devious maneuver, although I doubted she'd tried to.

When we reached the entrance of the Willrose estate, Neusch kindly removed the critter from my back, freeing me once more. My crew closed in on me immediately. *You guys have been a little too sweet toward that fake-child elf over there.*

When the Willrose men saw me, they commented openly on my situation.

“Incredible, aren't they?”

“As a fellow man, I must confess some envy...”

“Sheer respect wins out for me.”

I laughed to myself. *Jealous, huh? Well, you'd be surprised how much raw physical strength this requires.* It wasn't too bad, though. Mei was fortunately doing a good job coordinating our arrangements. It helped that everyone was being considerate too.

The girls crowded me as we headed to the estate's rooftop garden. The family had already set up a party—hell, a banquet. Dishes and drinks lined the many tables. Satisfied after mobbing me, my crew was spirited away by the Willrose women, and I headed over to hang out with the guys.

“Mercenary work, adventure, flying around outer space... If that isn’t every man’s dream, I don’t know what is,” one told me.

“Add romancing beautiful women to boot,” another interjected.

“You elves have long lives,” I said. “It’s never too late to start, right?”

When I suggested that, the elves exchanged looks and shook their heads.

“We may dream of adventure, romance, thrills, and women, but we can’t say we’re enthusiastic enough to risk our lives in their pursuit.”

“Nor to abandon the homes, families, and stable lives we’ve cultivated...”

“That’s part of why we admire your choosing the mercenary path and succeeding at it.”

“Fair enough,” I replied. “But listen, those girls are mine. Keep those lecherous eyes off.”

“How rude. We’re gentlemen.”

“And I have a *wife*!”

“Maybe I *should* be a mercenary,” the youngest-looking elf muttered to himself. I didn’t know how much preparation and expense that would take, but I wished good luck to him. *Just don’t come back and haunt me if you can’t hack it and get killed. Not my fault!*

“I hate to be vulgar, but...isn’t it difficult handling them all?”

“Well, a little... But I’ve got stamina.” I didn’t mean that in a sexual way; I meant actual stamina. Though that meant I had sexual stamina too, yes.

“You certainly look it.”

“Stamina’s key, eh?”

Elven men were typically slender. Given their military background, they were toned, but they didn’t seem very muscular. That said, the Grald Clan chieftain Zesh had certainly been macho despite being an elf.

Just as the conversation was about to turn obscene, a gruff baritone—Neusch himself—interrupted us. “What in the world are you boys saying to Captain Hiro? He’s like a son to me.” His tone was accusatory, but not seriously angry.

He sounded more fed up than anything.

“You’re late, head of the household.”

“I wouldn’t have felt right until I said my piece to Nazarus. Oh, right—Hiro, you’ll stay at our estate tonight. We’ll set rooms aside for you.”

“I appreciate the thought, but we already booked a hotel.”

“Is that so? Well, I suppose I can’t force you.” Neusch looked genuinely disappointed. “By the way, Hiro, you seem to be getting along quite well with Salma.”

“Whoa. I don’t like where this is going.”

“Come to think of it, he had dwarves with him...” one of the men noted.

“He’ll go for anything, huh...? I do think it’s too early for Salma, though.”

“This is slander!” I shouted. “Do you think I’m some lust-crazed monster?”

“Now, Hiro, why not justify yourself a little?” Neusch pressed me, practically emanating a palpable dark aura.

“I knew you’d do this! Take responsibility for shutting *them* up!” I shielded myself by redirecting my host toward the slanderous elves.

I might’ve been the most inexcusable harem master in the universe, but touching Salma would cross an obvious line into outright criminality. Although maybe that’s not persuasive coming from the guy who slept with the dwarves.

Unable to keep watching Neusch bother me, a woman—seemingly his wife—saved me. “Dear, please. You’re being rude to our son-in-law.”

“Son-in...?! N-no! He can’t have Salma!”

“Nobody *said* Salma! I’m talking about *Elma*! She’s a member of the family, too! Sorry, Hiro. He turns into such a pain once he starts drinking. I’ll keep him here—you just go back to your friends.”

“Thanks.”

I decided to ignore the “son-in-law” talk—though not refute it, since Elma and I had no plans to leave each other. I wouldn’t encourage the conversation, though. Our relationship wasn’t about the Willroses; it was about us.

“Sorry,” one elf told me. “Neusch loses his head when it comes to Salma.”

“He’s overprotective!”

“Nah,” I defended him. “Dads act that way about daughters.”

If I had a daughter someday, I might end up just as annoying as Neusch. I heard fathers couldn’t resist the urge to protect their endearing little girls, although I didn’t feel that way yet.

“Oh, Master Hiro, look! Tiny Elma was adorable!”

“Hey!”

“Hon, you gotta look at this one too. She’s too dang cute.”

“She was like a little doll.”

The girls were calling me, so I left the guys behind and went to look at Elma’s cute baby pictures.

“W-wait! Hold on! Hiro, don’t look!”

“Aw, is someone embarrassed?”

“Let me go!”

Elma tried to rush over and stop me, but one of the Willrose women caught her and kept her from moving. I’d never gotten the chance to look at those pictures on our last visit. Now was my chance.

“See? Look, Master Hiro!”

“Wow,” I said. “She really was a cute kid.”

The picture of young Elma displayed on Mimi’s tablet was the textbook definition of adorable. She had silky, shoulder-length silver hair and adorable round eyes. The frilly princess dress she wore was just too cute to bear.

“I bet those clothes would still look good on ya.”

“Elma does have elegant features.”

“Good idea,” I agreed. “Let’s get her a dress like that sometime.”

“How about we try the shops where you bought me clothes?” Mimi suggested.

Hmm? Come to think of it, Mimi and I went somewhere like that on a date. But she doesn't wear those cute Gothic Lolita-style clothes unless I ask her to, even after I went through the trouble of buying them... Well, I won't force her if she's not into those herself.

"Hell, why don't we get nice clothes for everyone?"

"Huh? *Us*, too?" Tina gasped.

"For shorties like us, I don't think it'd be worth it," Wiska said sadly.

"I disagree there. Mei, you want in on this?"

"If you wish, Master."

"Well, I'm not doing it!" Elma shouted, but I knew she was susceptible to peer pressure. If I asked her, she'd cave in the end, I was certain. Honestly, I had a feeling she didn't really mind the idea of getting dressed up.

We'd had a lively, yet somewhat peaceful, first day at the Willrose estate.

The next day, I—we, rather—spent a relaxing morning in the hotel room.

Mimi was down thanks to a hangover. Elma wasn't as badly off, but she was exhausted enough to stay curled up in bed. Tina and Wiska weren't hungover, but they slept late anyway. Maybe they were tired from all their work lately.

Mei went out to buy hangover medicine. It was supposedly good stuff; you started feeling better the moment you swallowed it. I didn't know whether anything like it existed back in my old world or how well it worked; I was no drinker, let alone the kind of guy who drank to excess. I had a feeling medicine in this universe was more advanced in general, though.

I sat on the couch with the sacred tree's seed in my lap, grumbling to myself. "Hmmm..."

"Is something wrong?" Tina asked from her seat next to me.

She'd attended yesterday's banquet along with everyone else, but *she* wasn't hung over. In fact, she'd been energetic since early morning, though there wasn't much to direct her energy toward beyond sipping tea and watching the

news on the holo-display.

“Just mulling over what to do about that Mary woman. And the rest of Crimson Lance, I guess.” I fiddled with the seed in my hands, spinning it around. Judging from the way it flashed, it enjoyed that treatment. Its gentle flashes didn’t seem to be protests, at least.



“Oh, um...I see. I suppose I can’t offer any wisdom there.” Tinia looked troubled. She hadn’t met Mary in person, but she’d watched footage Mei procured. If you just saw media of Mary, you might think she was pretty, but she had an inexplicably grating vibe face to face.

“Worst case, we make a mad dash for the gateway. If we reach it, we’re free and clear.”

If we ran to a faraway high-tech system via the gateway network, Crimson Lance couldn’t pursue us. Only the Imperial Fleet and a select few people with special licenses could use that system. That was why just running away was an attractive prospect.

On the other hand, Crimson Lance was a high-speed force made up of small and medium ships, and the *Black Lotus* was slow. If we just fled, odds were they’d catch us. And if they intercepted us, escape would be all but impossible.

“What exactly is the problem, then?”

“For one thing, we’re too slow to get away. And I don’t see how we can protect the *Black Lotus* if they catch us, however good a fight we put up.”

The strength difference would make a head-on fight disadvantageous. The *Krishna* could easily eliminate Mary’s entire fleet in successive one-on-one fights, but things wouldn’t be that easy.

If I were commanding Crimson Lance, I’d distract the *Krishna* and focus fire on the *Black Lotus*. Since we only had two ships, “divide and conquer” would be a good strategy. There was no getting around our shortage of firepower.

Of course, I couldn’t prove that Mary would order Crimson Lance to attack us, but my gut warned me that it was certain.

“Hmm. If all we lack is numbers...” They’d likely go for a head-on fight, so our lack of numbers would be what killed us. What if we could make up for it?

“Numbers, huh...? Maybe there *is* a way.”

Either way, I’d need time. I had to avoid hurrying things and wait for my moment. Beyond that, there was one more problem to solve.

I turned to Tinia, and she cocked her head curiously. “Hm?”

Fair. I'd have been curious too if someone announced they'd solved their problem, then just stared at me. "Don't worry. I think I've worked out my issue already. Now, it's time we make a choice about *your* plans."

Tinia looked down silently. The seed in my hands shone brightly, as if criticizing me. *How about I toss you out into space now? Don't blame me. I can't just leave this an open question forever.*

"That said, there's effectively *no* choice. Right?"

"No. I don't plan to abandon Theta," Tinia replied. I thought "abandon" was a strong word. Still, if she came with us, it wasn't like she could come back often. Not that she needed me to tell her that. "Sir Hiro..."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think I should do?" Tinia gazed at me from the end of the couch.

I looked back at her. "I think you should go home, since you have a home you can go back to." That was my judgment call.

"You sound so certain..."

"Yeah. Mimi and I *don't* have homes to go back to. I think Tina and Wiska are the same. More importantly, the crew support each other and help each other stand on two feet. Elma has her own circumstances, but she willingly gave up a comfortable life to become a mercenary—all on her own."

"You feel I lack her resolve...?"

"I shouldn't say, given that I kind of stumbled into mercenary work myself. But yeah...I think so."

If she *was* willing to throw everything away and join us, she wouldn't be asking me what to do. She'd either say it wholeheartedly or—leaving aside whether this was possible from a security standpoint—keep quiet and try to stow away on our ship. If she left the decision to someone else, I considered that proof that she didn't have the resolve.

"If things were so bad here that we'd kill you by leaving you, I'd be willing to kidnap you. But that's not the case, is it?"

“No...”

“People here love and care about you, right?”

“Right.”

“Then I think you should go home.”

“...Of course.” Tinia looked down again. No doubt she’d hoped I would intervene and tell her to come with us. Unfortunately, I couldn’t fulfill that hope.

Maybe expecting her to hold her own against me or Mei in a fight would be too much, but if she’d been a fierce enough hand-to-hand fighter to outmatch Elma, or a doctor with cutting-edge medical tech, or a mind-blowing psionic warrior, I would’ve been all too willing to beg her to join our crew.

Tinia had no such skills, though. Granted, her magic was powerful and had saved my life...but it wasn’t better than nanomedicine or healing pods, and her offensive spells were no more powerful or versatile than laser guns and rifles. She had impressive survival skills, but only in the forests of Theta. She couldn’t apply those skills anywhere else. I thought her character and personality were perfect, but to put it bluntly, she wasn’t good enough to be a member of the crew.

As I thought about Tinia, the seed in my hands suddenly quivered. It had sometimes done this before, but this time was a little abnormal.

“Hm?”

“Is something happening?” Tinia asked.

“Well, it sure is vibrating... Whoa!”

There was a loud crunching sound as cracks ran through the sacred seed. Something started wriggling out. Okay, not “something.” Obviously a bud. A bud had emerged from the football-sized seed. It looked a little like a sprouting coconut, though the fruit-to-seed ratio was totally off.

“It...sprouted,” Tinia gasped.

“Really did. Ew. Gross.” I couldn’t help blurting that out as I watched the tendril wriggle around. As if understanding my disgust, the sprout patted my

hand. *Okay, that sprout thing is seriously off-putting. It might as well be a tentacle.* “Hot potato!” I hurled it onto the couch.

“Er, that’s an object of worship. Could you treat it a little more gently?” Tinia gave me a wry smile and picked up the seed.

“Sorry, my bad. Um, anyway...I can’t take you with us, but that doesn’t mean it’s goodbye forever. Theta’s food is great, and we have a good relationship with the Willroses. It won’t be often, but we’ll be back once in a while.”

“Now you’re being sweet? How dastardly.” Tinia shot me a mock glare as she cradled the seed at her chest.

I laughed and shrugged back at her. “You didn’t know I’m a good-for-nothing mercenary?”

“Hee hee! Now I know. You really are a dastardly good-for-nothing, Sir Hiro.” She smiled.

Yeah, I think I cheered her up a bit. This might not be the most satisfying result for her, but I’d call it a realistic compromise.

“Hmm. That’s what you decided, huh?” Elma asked languidly, leaning against me. She wore only a tank top and panties—unsexy, or very sexy, depending how you looked at it.

Tinia had taken the sprouting seed to the Willrose estate, planning to use their connections to contact her family and discuss how to handle the seed at this stage. I’d considered escorting her there, but she’d firmly refused, saying that it was an elf problem and she couldn’t bear to trouble me with it. Neusch had assured me that he’d take care of her, so I left it up to them.

When Elma woke up, I told her what had transpired, which brought us up to speed.

“That’s not much of a reaction,” I said.

“What do you expect? She was just another poor girl you subjected to your venomous fangs.”

“More slander. My fangs aren’t venomous at all.”

“I beg to differ.”

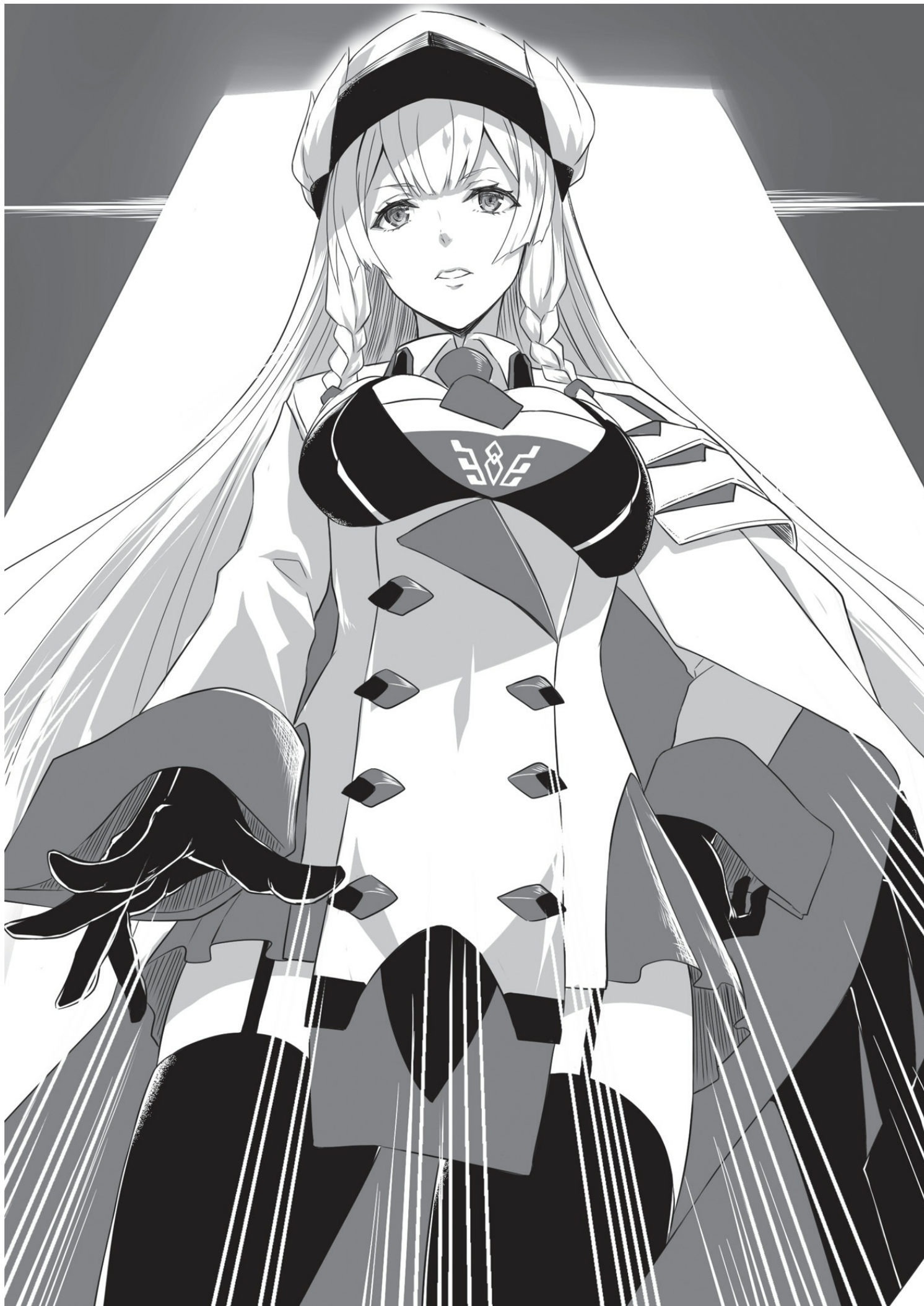
“Nuh-uh...” I protested weakly as Elma rubbed her face against me. *She sure is going at it. Is she marking me with her scent or something?* “The sacred tree seed sprouted, and I settled things with Tinia. Sounds like a win to me.”

“But you won’t see those things through to the end?”

“Going further would feel too heavy-handed.”

I’d only brought Tinia along on the Red Flag operation to cool public controversy, and because Zesh had envisioned the attack earning Tinia a sort of military accomplishment. The sacred tree sprouting while she worked alongside me, the guy chosen as the seed’s guardian, would also lend Tinia weight as the seed’s maiden. We were hitting two birds with one stone.

Now that the seed had sprouted and everything was going the way Zesh wanted, there was no need for me to interfere further. It might sound cold, but any problems were in the hands of Tinia, Zesh, and the elves of Theta now. That said, things would look different if I decided to use my authority as the seed’s guardian.



“Meh, maybe.” Elma shrugged. “It’s not like looking after her right now is convenient or safe.”

“Hey, about that. I had this idea...” I told her what I’d come up with earlier.

At first, Elma reacted with obvious disbelief, but then she mulled it over. “I see... I hadn’t thought of that, but when I consider it hard, *maybe*. I mean, you’re not wrong.”

“Right? It’d cost some money, but not more than I’m willing to spend.”

“Yeah... And if you add a rank restriction, she can’t sneak in,” Elma agreed. If *she* thought it was a good idea, it just might go okay. “When are you putting this plan into action?”

“Once news gets out that the star system blockade has been lifted and shipping routes are safe again, merchants will start coming back to this system—with bodyguards. That’s the ticket.”

“Yeah, you’re right! Mimi and Mei can handle intel. When they get back, we’ll discuss it with them.”

“Let’s do just that.”

Two weeks had passed since we’d landed on Leafil IV. During that period, we collected information on movements on Leafil Prime, hung out with the Willroses, dealt with the Minpha chieftain Miriam when she rushed to greet us again, and helped Tinia fend off the media. It was a busy but fulfilling couple of weeks. After that, we said goodbye to the Willroses and checked out of our hotel, ready to head to our next destination.

“I’m coming, too!” Before us appeared a tiny elf girl wearing mercenary gear and armed with what looked like a miniature laser gun in a hip holster. It was, of course, Salma.

“Not happening,” I declined.

“Refused point-blank?! You won’t think about it a little?!”

“Nope. Not interested. All other age issues aside, I’m not putting someone

who isn't even grown up yet on my crew."

"Hmph! M-my potential is unlimited!"

"Sure, maybe. But we're not looking for apprentice crew."

We might've had time to teach Salma some crew skills, but we didn't need fresh blood. Maybe that'd change once Elma had her own ship; then again, while Mimi and Mei shared strategy info via data link, we wouldn't need to assign Elma's ship an operator. It'd be a pretty poor reason to bring Salma, at any rate.

"But Mimi's *younger* than me."

Pulled into our argument, Mimi became flustered. "Th-that's true, but..."

True, Mimi was Salma's junior. And despite the Imperial definition of adulthood, it wasn't unnatural for people to treat her like a kid. Her body hadn't grown up fully either, though she'd become taller and meatier since we met. In a muscular way, I mean. Of course, other parts of her were growing as well.

"That doesn't change the fact that you're a child, Salma. I sure hope you have Uncle Neusch's permission to be out here pestering us."

"I-I..." Salma averted her eyes.

Yeah, figures. If she had permission, Neusch or his wife would be here backing her up. Neither of them are, so she's acting under her own steam.

"Scared of what'll happen if ya take her with us, hon?"

"How about you shut up for a minute, Tina?" I smiled and tousled Tina's hair firmly. Extremely firmly.

"Ow!"

It was true that I'd slept with Tina and Wiska. I doubted I'd try anything with Salma, but you know my track record, so I *was* scared of letting her aboard. I was terrified, seriously, regardless of what the Imperial laws were. "Anyway, your request is rejected. In your current state, I can't let you onto the crew."

"Ugh... Then how do I qualify?"

"Hmm... You need to be strong enough to hold your own in battle. Acquire

skills useful for mercenary work and as a ship crew member at a practical level. I'm not budging on those points."

Of our current crew, only Elma and Mei fulfilled those criteria. Still, I wanted them in anyone new coming aboard, although I could make exceptions for specialists like Tina and Wiska.

"Um, what if people's roles overlap?" Wiska asked.

"No worries there. Redundancy isn't necessarily bad, whether in terms of pilots, operators, or mechanics. Of course, it's best if we don't need to rely on that redundancy."

"I suppose that's fair," she said in understanding. Our mechanics were especially overworked lately. Hiring one or two more might not be a bad idea.

"There you have it. Give up, kid."

"Mmgh... Then you're saying that, if I can do those things, you'll take me with you?"

"Those things, plus parental consent, and I'll think about it."

"Sounds like something a bad man would say!" Salma shouted and charged at me.

"This is the sincerest response I can give you! We don't know what might happen, so I can't make any promises." I held her off with a single fingertip to the forehead, chuckling to myself. *At least do something about your attitude before trying to join my crew.* "Anyway, that's the bottom line, so drop it for now. We can't take you with us, but we'd be happy if you saw us off."

The Willrose women were supposed to come to the airport where we'd parked the *Krishna* to watch us leave. I figured we might as well take Salma and hand her off there.

"Oh, you're taking Salma too?"

"He moves fast."

"I'm *not* taking her with us, got it? I swear to god."

After that exchange with the Willrose women, we handed Salma over, boarded the *Krishna*, and flew to the general port where the *Black Lotus* was docked. It had felt like, if I said we *were* taking her, the women might actually go along with it, so I'd politely declined. Imagine if I'd joked that I was going to take her...at that point, they'd probably have forced me to.

"You sure you don't want to bring her?" Mimi asked.

"Salma's not bad, but I'm not babysitting on this ship."

"Damn right," Elma agreed.

"And we're kind of in the middle of a mess."

"You don't think Crimson Lance has given up and left by now?" Wiska suggested.

"Unfortunately, no." Mei quickly and flatly denied that wishful thinking. She'd been gathering information from Leafil Prime, so she was up to date on Crimson Lance's activities.

"Well, all we can do now is scram," I reflected. "Though I'm afraid they won't sit idly by and watch us go."

"Um, are you sure they'll attack?"

"I'm sorry that the only basis for this is my intuition, rather than something concrete, but I think the likelihood of an attack is nearly a hundred percent."

"I just hope that assumption turns out wrong," Mimi said.

"You know him, though," Tina sighed.

"His intuition is something else," Wiska agreed.

"Fascinating," said Mei.

Only Mimi—who had the most common sense of all of us—and Mei doubted my intuition. According to Mei, attacking either me in the *Krishna* or her in the *Black Lotus* would be too risky. Despite the combat power Crimson Lance's achievements implied, they'd likely lose over half their ships before they downed the *Black Lotus*, even if they took us by surprise. On top of that, the *Krishna* would probably escape. Mei asserted that the risk was far too high for

the return.

Her battle analysis was nothing to scoff at, and I'd have fully supported her claims if not for my odd feeling. But it was just too intense to ignore.

Meanwhile, Elma and the mechanics backed me up...or, more accurately, had basically *given* up. It was more like they passively accepted that I attracted trouble than proactively supported me. It was nice to be trusted...but not like that.

After a short discussion, we reached the general port. Thanks to the *Krishna*, even long distances were only a hop, skip, and jump away. We used remote control to open the *Black Lotus*'s hangar hatch and parked the *Krishna*.

After disembarking from the *Black Lotus*, we found Tinia, Grald Chieftain Zesh, Minpha Chieftain Miriam, and several other big-shot elves waiting for us.

"Sorry. Did we keep you waiting?"

"No, you're right on time. We just arrived ourselves." Zesh approached me for a handshake. "You've been a big help, Sir Hiro, despite all the trouble we caused you. As chieftain, I must thank you. And as Tinia's father as well."

"It's water under the bridge." I gave him a wry grin. "Next time we land on Theta, though, maybe try to keep a lid on trouble."

The Grald Clan's hospitality and gifts had been great. Still—almost dying in an aircraft crash, a bunch of technophobes delaying our rescue, being shouted at rather than apologized to, dealing with the sacred tree seed, having to bring Tinia to fight Red Flag... Man, this leg of the trip had been a handful.

"Ya sure it wasn't all your bad luck, hon?"

"Shut it." *It's not my fault! At least, it's not like I get wrapped up in this stuff because I want to!*

"I pray for your safe travels. Don't you forget to train your psionic abilities," Miriam reminded me.

"Okay. I don't really know how to...but, uh, I'm sure I'll figure out a way." The only ability I could intentionally use was the one that slowed down time, and overusing it put a heavy strain on my body. Still, I could try things like

meditation or concentration strategies.

“Feel free to visit again. I trust you’ll cover your own travel expenses next time,” Baron Nazarus joked.

“Of course.” I shook hands with him too. We hadn’t interacted much, but I genuinely appreciated his sending Liliun to guide us *and* paying for our stay.

Tinia watched me from a distance. We didn’t exchange words, but we smiled and waved at each other. I didn’t know whether she kept her distance for political reasons or what, but weirdly, it didn’t make me feel bad.

What was that odd sensation...? There was nothing wrong with not feeling bad, but I couldn’t help but sense that top-tier nuisance of a seed was involved.

“Master, I’ve finished loading our luggage.”

“Thanks, Mei. All right... Sorry to have bothered you all.”

“I don’t think it was really your fault, Hiro,” Elma muttered. *Nope. I didn’t cause trouble on purpose; I was dragged into it against my will. I don’t know how the elves of Theta look at it, though.*

“We’ve been through a lot,” I continued, “but I won’t forget the kindness of Theta’s people. If there’s a chance, I’ll be happy to meet you all again.”

With that goodbye, we left Leafil IV behind. I’d love to reminisce about our long stay there. More trouble awaited in space, though; work never ceased for us.

Chapter 10: Outsourcing

REBOARDING THE *BLACK LOTUS*, we ascended into space. Outside the atmosphere, we headed straight toward the colony Leafil Prime.

“Are they following us?” I asked.

“It’s faint, but the *Black Lotus*’s subspace sensors are picking up a signal,” Mimi replied. “Right here.”

Subspace sensors could detect ships traveling in FTL mode, and ours had just captured the signal of a small ship tailing us.

“Yeah,” Elma sighed. “They’re following us.”

Sorry, Crimson Lance. When I ordered the Black Lotus, I told Space Dwergr I wanted the best equipment. Not even small recon ships can escape our sensors.

“It’s wild how they’re sticking to us like glue,” I said. “Even I was starting to think I was being paranoid. I can’t believe I was right.”

“Yeah, I thought the same thing. But the way they’re pursuing us is no joke.”

“No chance it’s coincidence, huh?”

According to our sensors, our pursuer was registered with the mercenary guild. Its ID indicated that it was a recon ship that had been working with the Leafil star system fleet while we were on Theta. In other words, it was a Crimson Lance ship.

In the *Krishna*, we stood by again. Although I doubted it would happen, it was possible they’d attack immediately. Laugh and call me a coward if you want, but I say it’s stupid to drop your guard when you’re dealing with someone who legitimately *could* kill you.

“This is kind of a headache,” said Mimi. “Are we going to be dealing with these guys all the time from now on?”

“Nah. If we make it through the gateway, that’s the end of it. From that point

on, we can set an alarm to sound anytime our sensors detect Crimson Lance ships. I mean, we're *always* mindful of ships following us, right?"

"Uh-huh."

That was a habit I'd picked up playing *SOL*. In an online game, you've got all kinds of players. For every gamer who played solo, only interacting with friends sporadically, there were others who formed teams to explore deep space, the frontier, or new planets.

There were also players who established pirate gangs. Their usual scheme was to position a seemingly harmless "weak-but-fast recon ship" near a colony, choose a target, investigate its movement patterns, and set an ambush point. When they carried that ambush out, they used maximum firepower to down their prey speedily, salvaged as much as they could in a short span, and fled before the star system fleet arrived.

Based on my observations of the recon ship following us, I assumed Crimson Lance saw us as their prey now. Preparing in advance had been the right idea after all.

"Master, we will soon arrive at Leafil Prime."

"Got it. Time to connect with some tough allies, then."

I'd already told the gang about my message to the mercenary guild. Its contents were simple; I informed the guild that I'd received a VIP escort request on Leafil IV and needed extra help to carry out the job well.

Mercenaries occasionally received requests outside the guild. If needed, they could hire additional mercenaries through the guild, paying the guild a fee and the other mercs a reward. I'd used that system to bolster our numbers, offering a fifty-percent bonus to the daily pay for mercenaries below silver rank. The merc that destroyed a pirate ship would receive the corresponding bounty; furthermore, we'd recover as much loot as possible and deliver it to the victors. Since we had a mothership, the *Black Lotus*, we'd also offered free use of its cargo bay for the mercs to temporarily store loot they couldn't fit in their ships.

"But you just hired a hodgepodge of mercenaries, didn't you? Can they stand up to Crimson Lance?" Mimi's concern was reasonable.

“It depends how many show up. But, eh, I doubt it.”

“Um...Isn’t that a problem?”

Crimson Lance was a gold-rank mercenary group. Its ships were used to working as a team, so they were sure to be well-coordinated in battle. Even if we made up our numbers with a bunch of silver-rank mercenaries, I frankly wasn’t sure we’d win a head-on battle without enough backup to utterly swarm Mary’s fleet.

“We don’t have to win in this case,” Elma answered for me. “Right, Hiro?”

“There you go. See? Elma gets me.”

“Save the praise.” Elma’s slightly reddened ears twitched at my compliment. She and I were of one mind here; I’d told her the idea as soon as it occurred to me, after all.

“Umm, what do you mean?” Mimi asked.

“Our goal is to reach the gateway and shake them off our tail. And if we create a situation where Crimson Lance doesn’t attack us, we’ve already won.”

“Hmm?” Mimi cocked her head. No doubt she was having trouble reconciling two facts: that we didn’t have enough forces despite hiring mercenaries, and that Crimson Lance supposedly wouldn’t attack us. The light bulb didn’t take long. “Oh, I get it! If Crimson Lance attacks us, even a single surviving mercenary could report their misdeeds and end them!”

“Bingo. If they just attacked the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*, they might be able to hush it up. But the more of us there are, the less likely it is that they’ll kill every last one of us.”

“I see!”

That was the plan. Even if our forces were inferior, just one survivor evading pursuit and contacting the star system fleet or mercenary guild would spell the end of Crimson Lance. They’d be stripped of gold-rank status and targeted by mercenaries, the star system fleet, and even the Imperial Fleet as wanted criminals.

The mercenary guild was especially vindictive when issuing bounties on its

own members. Mercenaries-turned-criminals could expect extra-large guild bounties on their heads in addition to Imperial bounties. Back when I'd played *Stella Online*, I'd made a whole lot of Ener killing former mercs with tasty bounties. Since coming to this universe, though, I'd just kept an eye on criminal mercs rather than picking fights, which was dangerous in real life.

SOL's high-bounty marks were mostly former soldiers or mercenaries, and their ships were naturally far stronger than average pirates'. That meant that the parts you salvaged when you destroyed them were super valuable. Still, they had player-level or even better equipment, so they really were dangerous targets. And if you cornered them, they just fled.

Players who got too carried away could also end up with bounties on their heads if they accidentally downed another player or non-hostile NPC's ship. In most cases, they could initially pay off the crime, but repeat offenders typically got bounties. That was like joining the bad guys. Some people had fun doing that, but it left most stations inaccessible—hell, just approaching would provoke fire from station defenses, star system fleet and government forces, and even other players. So that playstyle was mostly an option for masochists.

"There you have it," I said. "With the help of brave fellow mercenaries, we'll get through this crisis. There's no rule that says we have to fight all our battles alone."

"I see, but...is doing this okay? We don't actually have any VIPs from Leafil IV on our ship." Mimi tilted her head again.

"What're you talking about, Mimi?" I smirked. "Right next to me, I have a woman related by blood to powerful people on Leafil IV *and* Imperial nobility. I'm not lying at all."

"Well...I guess it's not technically a lie." She gave me a conspiratorial grin.

I had nothing to be ashamed of, though. It *wasn't* a lie! Besides, what was wrong with playing a little dirty if it meant you won?

"Three iron-rank, four bronze-rank, two silver-rank. Not too shabby, eh?"

"Well, I doubt we can expect much but noise from the iron and bronze

mercs.”

“They’re way tougher than pirates, though, right?”

“Absolutely. Still, we’re up against Crimson Lance, not space pirates. Well, in the worst case, one of the mercs can escape. Or shield us to help us make *our* escape.”

I knew what I was saying was vulgar, but it was a mercenary’s job to be ready for that eventuality. Of course I’d do my best not to sacrifice anyone, but I wouldn’t flinch if it was necessary.

By the way, the request I’d made paid thirty thousand Ener a day to iron-ranks, fifty thousand to bronze, and eighty thousand to silver.

Our departure time was in exactly four hours, and the contract was for forty-eight hours—two whole days, including time in hyperlane travel. If nothing went wrong, we’d be there in twenty-four hours, but I’d promised the mercs two days’ pay even if we wrapped up early. I still planned to give rewards and bounties from pirate kills directly to the killers, and to let the mercs store whatever they couldn’t fit on their ships in the *Black Lotus*’s cargo space until it was full.

When merchant ships came to a system full of nature, like the Leafil System, it was almost always to buy and sell crops and natural crafts from local planets. It took at least a week or two to complete those dealings, and no merchant paid their mercenary escort throughout that period. So the mercenaries accompanying merchants on such escort requests often looked for additional jobs that took them out of the star system. I’d anticipated that when I submitted my own request to the guild.

The star system containing the gateway we were heading toward was five hyperlane stops away—not far at all. Most systems along the way had flourishing commerce and an Imperial Fleet presence, so they were very safe. In other words, my job looked easy and low-risk.

The safety of the surrounding systems also meant that private merchant activity was high; lots of easy bodyguard work was available for iron-and-bronze-rank mercenaries in the gateway-housing systems. Silver-rank mercenaries also tended to receive long-distance escort requests in systems

near gateways, so no mercenary would be left hungry there. Gateway systems in *Stella Online* had prospered similarly, and many players had used them as bases.

Places that were *too* peaceful were inconvenient for pirate-hunting, so after I got used to the work, I'd started to stray away from those locations.

"Using them as shields sounds a little cruel..."

"That's how bodyguard work is. In a worst-case scenario, it's a mercenary's job to help the client's ship get away. After all, if things go well, you get paid hand over fist for a little joyride. And if you're attacked, you usually just have to buy time until the star system fleet arrives."

"I guess so."

"If you're attacked in a system without a police fleet, and you fight off pirates that ambush you, congrats. You get promoted."

"When you think about it, aren't you kind of tricking these mercenaries?"

Whoops. She figured me out. Mimi was right. This was an extremely dangerous request that could lead to gold-rank enemy mercenaries targeting my lower-ranking allies. But I wasn't certain Crimson Lance was going to attack, so I couldn't include that in the request details. Whether they would was essentially unknown; after all, it was still possible that I was being paranoid.

"Mimi," I said at last, "the universe ain't fair."

"There's a dark side to every success story," Elma added.

"You're really brushing it off that quickly?"

"We're not heroes here to save the day. We're dirty mercs. But don't worry too much about it. With these numbers, I honestly don't think Crimson Lance will try anything."

Besides, if we had to fight, I'd immediately have the iron-rankers run away and call for help from the star system fleet or Imperial Fleet. If Mary's plan was to capture us and use us as an example rather than kill us outright, her fleet wouldn't batter us with anti-ship torpedoes or reactive warheads. We'd just have to hold out until the iron-rankers came back with the cavalry, and there

were plenty of maneuvers we could try when the going got tough.

In the end, if the powers that be came to help us, everything would end up okay. Long-distance communication wasn't the only way to attract them, so we'd find a way to escape and win.

After some brief communication with the mercenaries who'd work with us for this short period, we prepared to launch.

Though this was a short mission, I reflected, it would be my first time leading a fleet in this universe. But they weren't newbies, for the most part, so although I was leading them, I wouldn't need to waste much time showing them the ropes.

"As outlined in the mission request," I announced, "our destination is the quintuple-star Eiñors System, which has a gateway. I'll share route-setting data; make sure you put it into your navigation systems."

I received variations on "Yes, sir," "Understood," and "A'ight." Some ships stayed silent, but I didn't force them to reply. If they disobeyed orders or wandered off, I'd just let the mercenary guild know.

"During FTL and hyperdrive travel, sync with the *Black Lotus*—that's the big ship. We'll mass-apply for synchronized travel, so beyond accepting, you can leave that to us. During FTL, though, there's a chance we'll be intercepted and attacked. So, although we'll handle the travel itself, be braced to fight at a moment's notice. If you're not, you might just get destroyed while you pick your nose in the middle of a battlefield."

After I said that, I received a few immediate queries. They basically all asked whether we had an enemy in mind—other than space pirates—that was worth gathering such a force against.

"You might know this, but the recent Imperial Fleet operation against Red Flag was the result of two drop raids in a row on Leafil IV. So Red Flag earned it, of course. Still, the remnants may bear Leafil IV's elves a grudge. We also personally fought in the operation, so they have even more reason to hate *us*. In short, they might pay us a little visit to get revenge for their friends. We're

doing our best to be cautious.”

The mercs seemed generally satisfied with that response. Some still came off as doubtful, but I didn’t expect them to fully trust me. Those who’d sniffed out danger had good noses.

Of course, I’d lowballed the compensation for the mission a tiny bit to keep other mercs from getting suspicious. I’d also brought down the risk level by hiring a large fleet, though. And by making big concessions regarding loot and bounties, I gave the mercs the impression that they could win big if pirates *did* attack us.

After the call ended, Mimi’s brow furrowed. She gazed at me. “Um...I feel like we’re deceiving them.”

“Not at all. I mean, openly calling Crimson Lance suspicious would be dangerous in its own right.”

“We don’t have solid evidence against them, so it would be out-and-out slander,” Elma agreed.

Mimi seemed to be having a crisis over *us* making a fishy request this time. For Elma and I, though, it was just another day. If someone died carrying out this request, it was just because their luck and skill weren’t enough to keep them alive. Iron, bronze, silver: whatever your rank, you were a professional doing a job that involved risking life and limb.

And even if this was just a hodgepodge fleet we’d thrown together for an emergency, I wasn’t about to let the mercs die for nothing. If something happened, I’d pull out all the stops to prevent friendly casualties. Still, in the end, it was your own responsibility to keep yourself alive. That was exactly what *I’d* been doing when I hired them.

“Mimi, I’m not a fairy-tale hero, and I’m not a saint. I’m just a mercenary. Sometimes, we have to be willing to sacrifice other lives for our own. Let’s be clear here—I’m not planning to treat them as disposable pawns from the jump. If we’re attacked, I plan to fight back as much as possible.”

“Really?”

She still didn’t seem convinced. Maybe the ease of our fights so far had

skewed her perception. *How do I explain this better?*

“Mimi, I think you’re misunderstanding, so I’ll be blunt,” Elma interrupted. “However skilled Hiro is, with all his wacky maneuvers and the *Krishna*’s outstanding power, we still can’t fight Crimson Lance on our own. You saw how Hiro won easily against the Belbellum Federation, crystal life-forms, and his tournament opponents, right?”

“Yes.”

“The only reason he seized victory in those cases was that he was on the offensive. He controlled the flow of battle by confusing his opponents with surprise attacks and ridiculous moves. Don’t forget that ridiculous first move against Belbellum.”

Elma was referring to the Singing Crystal, an extremely dangerous item that summoned tons of crystal life-forms. If not for that crystal, the forces deployed in the Tarmein System never could’ve staved off the Belbellum invasion.

“But in the worst case,” she continued, “we’ll be fighting gold-rank mercenaries. Their ships are way better than pirates’, and they’re piloted by skilled, coordinated captains. Not even Hiro’s ridiculous tactics and the *Krishna*’s firepower will have a chance in a head-on fight. That’s how strong a gold-rank group is.”

“Thanks for explaining for me,” I said. “But did you really need to call my moves ‘ridiculous’ three whole times?”

“Yes, I did.”

Elma said it so vehemently, she left me no wiggle room to tone the term down. *Whoa, you did need to? Yep, okay, can’t blame you, then.*

“I bet you could still find a way to trounce them with ease,” Mimi said.

“You’re not wrong. Even I doubt that we *really* couldn’t win if Crimson Lance tried something.” The two stared at me. “I’m pretty good at taking on a group. But we don’t know their exact skill level, and we don’t have a good grasp of their ship specs. Without that info, I can’t say anything for certain.”

The simple truth was that you didn’t know until you tried. Taking firepower

into account, as well as shield and plating durability, the numbers were stacked against us. If Crimson Lance barraged us with lasers, which were effectively impossible to evade, even the *Krishna*'s high-powered shields wouldn't last. Our plating was a final defense, but as a small ship, the *Krishna* couldn't rely on that.

"Either way, the best plan is not to fight."

"He's right," said Elma. "That's the best plan by far."

"Think it's gonna go that well?"

"Doubtful." I'd honestly already given up on that front. That was why I'd hired mercenaries—to tip the scales to our side a little. If we could escape this mess with the *Krishna* alone, I wouldn't have needed to go through so much trouble... But things just didn't tend to work out that way, did they?

"Master, it is almost time to launch."

"Got it. All ships, put in a launch request and gather at Point Alpha. Mimi, launch request."

"Okay!" Mimi exclaimed, and started making the request.

I looked away from her, toward the area where Crimson Lance had been anchored. They'd already vacated, and other ships had anchored there. Apparently, Crimson Lance had left the day after I submitted my request. But, despite having left two days ago, they'd had a small recon ship tail us from orbit when we left Leafil IV four hours ago.

"Man," I sighed. "I hope they see our numbers and just give up."

"If only," Elma shrugged.

I really wish they'd do that.

Chapter 11:

A Trap

“ALL SHIPS HAVE ASSEMBLED. All *Black Lotus* synchronization requests have been accepted,” Mimi informed me.

“Roger that. Keep the generator output in combat mode.”

“Aye aye,” Elma confirmed. “Think they’ll go for it?”

“I don’t know. They don’t have many chances left. If they attack, I think it’ll be in the next system or the one after.”

The Eiñors System housing the gateway was five systems away. Security was usually extremely tight up to three systems from a gateway. Since gateways moved ships dozens of hyperlanes’ worth of distance instantly, they were of vital economic and military importance to the Empire. It would be disastrous if the security near one was threatened.

Plus, if groups like pirates ran amok, it’d just be bad for the Empire’s reputation. They’d be laughingstocks if they couldn’t secure their gateways. Long story short, gateway systems were typically well-secured. If a fight broke out near a gateway, you could be sure the Imperial Fleet would have an elite team there to stop it in under a minute.

The only places where Crimson Lance would be able to attack us were the Leafil System, the neighboring Milabreeze System, and the Holmi System beyond. Any farther, and an elite Imperial Fleet force would come, arrest *all* of us, and see the perpetrators punished heavily.

“Starting countdown. Faster-than-light drive will soon activate.”

“Got it. Welp, all we can do is take a shot at it. Don’t relax too much, but don’t be too nervous either.”

The three-two-one countdown appeared on the main screen. When it reached zero, there was a booming roar, and stars in the distance flowed into lines. The sight of FTL travel never ceased to amaze me...though hyperlane

travel was so psychedelic that it made me queasy.

“Any signals on the hyperspace sensor?”

“Hmm...looking at the *Black Lotus* sensor data, I can’t see anything special.”

“Think that recon ship joined the main force?”

“No idea. They had a four-hour jump on us, though. It wouldn’t be a surprise if they’d moved to a different system by now.”

Even if it that ship had met back up with Crimson Lance, it didn’t matter; it was very unlikely it would join the battle. We’d started moving too, so there was little point monitoring it at this point. Still, the fact that we didn’t see it anymore meant that they didn’t need to monitor *us* any longer. Were they really going to attack? Well, maybe the recon ship’s intel convinced them to throw in the towel.

As we discussed it, a message came in from Mei. “We will soon arrive at the hyperlane entrance and activate hyperdrive.”

Before long, our fleet was in the hyperlane.

“Can they attack us in the first place? We’re leaving the Imperial Fleet’s sphere of influence, but wouldn’t star system police still come? I know there are devices that interfere with communications, but it would still be risky, isn’t it? They’d be bound to attract attention.”

“You’re not wrong.”

As far as I understood it, communication jammers in *Stella Online* essentially caused radio interference by broadcasting masses of junk data. If you used one, the star system fleet would naturally catch on, so you’d need to do your dirty work quickly before they came back. I’d hired decoy mercs to extend the battle and prevent that, but...

“If they change their goal, we might be in trouble,” I muttered.

“Change their goal? How?”

“From capturing us to make an example of to mercilessly slaughtering us. That could give us grief—and I have a bad feeling. Or... No. Did I misunderstand their goal from the start?”

“That *is* a bad feeling, but wouldn’t slaughtering us force them to make a beeline for us right from the start?”

“No. There’s a way to kill us without getting caught,” I shuddered. This feeling was *intensely* bad. “We can’t turn back in a hyperlane, can we?”

“No... If this is scaring you that badly, it must be really bad. Now I’m scared...” Mimi’s voice quavered.

“What a coincidence—so am I,” Elma agreed. “What horrible thing did you just imagine, Hiro?”

“I don’t have proof that it’s Crimson Lance’s strategy. But you’ve both seen it happen once before... Mimi, get us on the comms with Mei.”

“Understood.”

“We’ve seen it?” Elma raised an eyebrow dubiously, but she’d figure it out in no time. After all, this strategy would let Crimson Lance finish us off without even dirtying their hands.

After we got through the psychedelic sights of the hyperlane, our fleet returned to normal space, led by the *Black Lotus*. At the same time, as we began the countdown to FTL drive, something exploded up ahead. *Damn it all, I knew it.*

“Ah!”

“Urk...!”

“Augh! Damn it!”

At that point, something akin to a shriek tore through my brain. It had pierced outer space and our airtight ship’s exterior, plating, and shields. It could only be a Singing Crystal. But this wasn’t the crystal’s normal shriek; it was like some kind of psionic shockwave, leaving our minds reeling.

“Can we get past them?” I asked Mimi, holding my aching head.

“I don’t know... No, I don’t think so.” She looked tense. I checked the sensor signals. Sure enough, the crystal life-forms had already torn through space and

started spawning. There were masses of them. Defeating so many would be back-breaking work for our force on its own.

“There’s no choice. Mei, plan B. All ships, move to defend the *Black Lotus*!”

“Understood. Thirty seconds remain until FTL drive is charged.”

“Roger.”

The FTL drive’s charge time increased with the mass of one’s ship. The *Black Lotus* was much more enormous than the *Krishna*, and it was hauling others through synchronized travel, which extended the charge time. Desyncing the *Krishna* wouldn’t shorten the charge time much at all, and we still needed to stop those crystals. If they breached the *Black Lotus*’s shields and damaged its plating and exterior while it charged, the charge would fizzle out.

By the way, plan A had just been to charge FTL as soon as possible and press ahead before Crimson Lance could try anything. Plan B was for the *Krishna* to stay behind and hold the fleet off while the other ships escorted the *Black Lotus*, escaping to safety.

“Time for a flashy battle, girls!” I turned off FTL sync and booted up our weapons system. The plan was to make our first move dramatic; we had to attract the enemy’s attention, after all.

“Understood,” Mimi replied. “Picking up crystal life-forms in the fleet’s path.”

“Subsystems ready anytime,” Elma informed me. “Crystal life-forms again, huh? I’d be happy if I never saw *any* of those going forward.”

“They’re like our BFFs now,” I quipped.

Accelerating the ship, I set the detonation distance of my anti-ship reactive torpedoes. Firing them all would make it impossible to deal with the big crystal, but we could leave that to the star system fleet that’d show up later. I doubted many crystals would follow us this time, so we’d be fine if we dealt with the medium-sized one blocking our path.

“Go kick some ass!” I fired two torpedoes, accelerated, and fired two more. They were set to explode in the *Black Lotus*’s path—in other words, the fleet’s escape route. My first priority was to use this wide-range attack to clear an

escape path for everyone.

“The crystals have started moving!”

“Prioritize hitting the ones that look like they’ll get in the way. One shot is enough to attract their attention.”

“Got it! I’ll operate the heavy lasers!”

“All yours.”

I piloted the ship and fired the two large flak cannons on the bow while Elma handled the *Krishna*’s four heavy-laser cannons. The cannons had wide firing radiuses, and you could aim them individually. In a typical battle, you’d want to focus firepower, so we didn’t use that feature often. Still, it was helpful when you needed to draw a lot of enemies’ attention at once.

“Reactive torpedoes detonating!”

The first torpedo blew away a broad swath of crystals. The remaining three followed suit shortly after, lighting up empty space. The remains of the crystal life-forms reflected the light, making for a glorious spectacle.

“It’s the start of a lovely party.”

“What part of this is lovely?!”

Ha ha ha! You’ve got to enjoy this stuff while you can, or you’ll miss out.

“What’s wrong, girls? Not gonna yell about how it’s too much to handle this time?”

I deftly flitted through the crystal life-forms charging us from all directions—well, maybe “flitted” isn’t the best term. I was actually using short, maximum-output bursts of the attitude control thrusters. Rather than delicate “flits,” it might be apter to call those “fwooshes” and “whooshes.”

“Well, third time’s the charm...”

I was focused on the fight, so I couldn’t turn to look at Mimi’s complexion. Based on her tone of voice, though, she wasn’t feeling good. To be frank, I wasn’t all that calm and collected either.

In some conditions, crystal life-forms could deal massive damage to even a galactic empire's invasion fleet. If a small ship like the *Krishna* went toe to toe with them, it'd be done for. One misstep, and we wouldn't even be space debris; we'd be assimilated into the crystal life-forms. Game over.

Even under these circumstances, the *Black Lotus* and its mercenary escort had managed to escape via FTL drive. We'd anticipated an issue like this ahead of warp-out and decided in advance what to do about it. If we *hadn't* planned ahead at all, we might've ended up like Belbellum's invasion fleet when they attacked the Tarmein System.

"Gah, you're moving too much! I can't aim!" Elma barked.

I laughed again. "Who cares? Just fire away, and you'll probably hit something!"

"Stop laughing and get us out of this horde! Our shield cells aren't exactly infinite!"

"I'm doing my best."

Elma was right. Now that the *Black Lotus* was off the battlefield, there was no reason for the *Krishna* to stick around. If this were a smaller group of crystals, I could have slaughtered them and demanded a hefty reward from the local star system fleet, but there were easily over five hundred of all sizes. That was probably just too much for the *Krishna* to handle on its own. Maybe I could do it, given enough time, but staying so focused for five to six hours would be far too tedious.

So why was I wasting time here instead of trying to immediately escape? Well, we were so thickly surrounded on all sides that I was struggling to break out. We were in the middle of a labyrinth of enemies full of malice—or hunger, maybe—for the *Krishna*, and that labyrinth shifted every time a crystal moved. Not easy to escape that, let me tell you.

"Help will probably come while we're stuck dealing with them. No need to be in such a hurry."

"Maybe not, but this sight is nerve-racking..."

I heard anxiety in Mimi's voice as I fired flak and crushed a group of small

crystals ahead of us. I slipped the *Krishna* through the resulting opening to avoid a charge from the side.

Between our use of reactive torpedoes, and escaped ships likely notifying the star system fleet, reinforcements were guaranteed to show up. Security was tight around hyperlane exits, after all. While I thought about that, fighting off attacking crystals, a voice dripping with sticky sadism came over the comms.

“Looks like someone’s having a hard time. Want some help, buddy?” I knew that voice. It was Captain Mary.

“I don’t know where you’re watching us from, but careful where you put your hands,” I told her. “Or they might get burned.”

“Aw, what a surprise. You worried about me now?”

“Of course. I’m a sucker for pretty ladies.” A lie, of course. I just didn’t want her to disrupt the crystals’ movement pattern; it could be dangerous. That said, I’d have very much welcomed her taking on half of the mob.

“Ha ha ha! Your insincerity’s a real breath of fresh air.”

At that moment, a really bad feeling hit me. I used the side thrusters to move the *Krishna* directly sideways, not hesitating to strike crystals in the process. The inertia-control system wasn’t powerful enough to compensate for the sudden acceleration, and my head whipped to the side. Our shield struck a small crystal life-form, and the recoil knocked me back the other way. When I saw a rainbow-colored flash tear through where the *Krishna* had just been, however, I knew I’d made the right move.

“Whoopsie. Sorry ’bout that. I was just trying to shoot cover fire, but with all the crystals here, I almost hit you by mistake.”

“That bitch...” I muttered.

“Wh-what was that just now?!” cried Mimi.

“That firepower was equal to a cruiser’s, or even a battleship’s, main cannons,” Elma noted.

The attack had probably come from a large-bore cannon attached to the crimson ship that had reminded me of the *Krishna*. *I see. That ship’s design*

combines maneuverability and firepower. Like someone thought, "Wouldn't a battleship's main cannon be even better if it had a small ship's agility?"

I couldn't know the exact strength, range, and mobility of Mary's ship, of course, but it was probably powerful in the right hands. Still, she'd surrounded herself with a fleet and all those bodyguards, so her ship's mobility and combat capabilities couldn't be *that* high. Not that that observation helped me at all in this situation, damn it!

"How are our shields?" I asked Elma.

"We didn't lose them all. We blew a shield cell, though."

"Shit..."

Shield cells were subsystems that rapidly recharged depleting shields. You had to use them before a shield was completely destroyed, so bad timing could still wipe your shields out. The cells were consumables, obviously, and there was a limit to how many you could install at once. I glanced at the remaining number—just three left.

"Oh—but that attack opened a hole in their encirclement!" Mimi said hopefully.

"No. If we fly through there, she'll pick us off."

I hadn't gotten a lock-on alert, which meant that Mary was probably aiming manually at us. *Shit. Unless she locks on, there won't be any evidence that she fired at us. If she hits us, she can just tell them it was an accidental stray shot.*

Worse, our sensors worked poorly surrounded by crystals. Even if I knew Mary's general direction, I couldn't pinpoint her, nor judge the distance she was firing from. *You know, you're kind of a bad person. Who shoots at someone already stuck in a swarm of crystals trying to kill them?*

"Hmm...what to do now?" mused Mary. "I'd love to provide cover fire, but imagine what'd happen if I hit you! And that horde of crystals is wreaking havoc on your sensors, right?"

"You're shameless."

"Heh heh... All right, I'll shoot off cover fire now," Mary declared. "Careful you

don't get hit!" She didn't make the slightest attempt to hide her sadism.

An awful tingle ran down my spine. *Damn it. We're really in the jaws of death.*

"It's uncanny."

My shot had missed again. This was the eighth time—the *eighth*. I'd chased him into the perfect kill zone and restricted his movement by siccing the crystals on him, and yet I'd missed him eight times.

"It can't possibly be my aim, can it?" I never missed like this. The instant I pulled the trigger, I'd been absolutely certain that I'd hit him. But, oddly, he had a way of evading at the last moment.

The weapon equipped to my Andal ship, the *Rainbow*, was like none other. It had an extremely long range and immense power to match. It was a little slower than laser cannons, which struck at the speed of light, but its fire traveled quickly enough and had much greater piercing power than lasers. Normal lasers vaporized a target's surface, causing explosions and shockwaves, but my *Rainbow* simply burned through a target without need for explosions. Its raw power fell short, but its high piercing ability could destroy a ship in one shot if it just got through the engine, cockpit, main thrusters, ammo bay, or another vital area.

"It's like he senses my intent and dodges..." I mused. "As if. He's not a psychic from that old anime."

I chuckled wryly as I recalled visuals of lightning running across that character's brow. I preferred not to imagine dealing with some kind of anime protagonist who could sense and evade things right before they hit him.

"Tch! Perish the thought."

Nine. I'd missed again. No, he'd dodged my shot. Could the pilot of that craft—the *Krishna*, was it?—really be some psychic? The hypothesis was only becoming more convincing.

One or two shots missing their mark would be one thing. I didn't have a perfect view of him, and the distance between us was a factor as well.

The third and fourth shots... Well, I could say they were just unlucky. I was only human, and that meant I made mistakes. Sometimes I had off days.

But the fifth and sixth? At that point, things were fishy, since it'd be no overstatement to say I'd made my way in this universe with my long-range sniping abilities.

In fact, I'd been thrown into this universe out of nowhere, and I'd only survived thanks to the knowledge, skills, and experience I'd cultivated in *Space Piracy Online*. I took some pride in that.

Seven, eight, nine. Doubt turned into certainty.

"It's almost like he's cheating..."

"Miss? It's nearly time."

"Argh! Damn it... Fine. Act like we're buddies here to help."

I was too old for my forces to keep calling me Miss, but I didn't bother stopping them. I didn't feel old enough to be called "Milady," and "Boss" seemed too obvious. "Miss" was unfortunately the best option.

"Yes, Miss."

If we couldn't kill him at this point, we'd have to give up for the time being. I'd have loved to pay him back, but we'd need to rethink things now that this plan had failed. It would be too dangerous to try this again against someone who'd dodged my shots nine times. I was beginning to doubt I'd win a direct battle. Even if I did, we'd suffer heavy losses. Losing a chunk of my fleet in order to down one ship would be bad business.

"His intuition is strong. Maybe it's wiser to keep my distance."

Looking back, he'd been ridiculously wary of me since our first meeting, where he'd seemingly already figured out who I was. If I needled him too much, there was no telling what outlandish things he'd do to catch me.

While I thought about that, a large force under the banner of the local star system's police fleet arrived in the sector. Hearing the collective booming of military ships warping out of FTL made me anxious, but we were clean here. I had nothing to fear.

“They’re here. Nothin’ more we can do. Everyone, work with the cops to smash those crystals.”

“Aye aye!”

“Damn it!”

“Eyaaah!”

“Whoa!”

I fired the side thrusters and attitude control thrusters at full blast, taking the G-forces of my reckless movements fully while I evaded that asshole Mary’s snipes. The *Krishna* had a high-performance inertia-control system, but it was still limited. If not for that device, though, I’d probably have blacked out or even sustained internal organ or bone damage.

“Shield cells!” I roared.

“We’re down to two!” Elma shouted back.

“Isn’t help here yet?” Mimi screamed.

That last dodge had caused us to graze a medium-sized crystal. I mean that literally; we’d just grazed it, and fortunately our shields had done so rather than the ship itself. That had attenuated our shields severely, though, turning multiple layers into just one. If we didn’t use a shield cell immediately, we’d be in huge trouble, since it would take them time to restore.

“That’s nine! I swear I’ll make that bitch pay!”

“Her aim’s getting better each time!”

“That one glanced off us. I’m shocked that you can dodge those.”

“When you know what the enemy’s thinking, it’s easy to predict where they’ll shoot!”

Still, I couldn’t say with confidence that I’d dodge the next one; I didn’t know how far away Mary was. Yet I could tell from the second shot onward what angle she was shooting from. Beyond the angle, you just needed to know the timing, which was obvious: she always fired at exactly the most inconvenient

moment for me. As long as I was mindful of that, I could duck when those moments came.

The problem was that I was surrounded by crystal life-forms. Going out of my way to evade meant colliding with those, and that was real dangerous danger there. What, am I not being coherent now? Deal with it.

“Ah!”

“Huh?”

“Th-there they are! The star system fleet!”

“Hell yeah! We win!”

The *Krishna*’s sensors picked up star system fleet ship signals; the vessels were arriving in this sector one after another. We received a communication from the *Black Lotus*, which had warped out of FTL alongside the fleet vessels.

“Master, I will open a path for you now.”

“Hmm?”

Wait. Open a path? You don’t mean you’ll aim the Black Lotus’s electromagnetic launcher this way, do you? Mei? Mei, can you hear me?

“Trajectory calculation complete,” Mei continued, heedless of my confusion. “Sending data now.”

“Wait...!”

The *Krishna*’s main screen displayed a bright-red bombardment trail in a straight line from the *Black Lotus*. *Mei’s actually firing it this way?!*

“Firing.”

In the pitch-black space visible between crystals, there was a single red flash. *Yep, that’s definitely the Black Lotus. No doubt about it.*

“Here comes EML!” Mimi called.

“At least she was nice enough to send us the trajectory,” Elma groaned.

“Excuse me for not being grateful!” *We’re basically still taking fire! If that hits us, we’re screwed!* Unlike Mary’s shots, though, the EML had a wide damage

area. It'd leave a bigger hole in the crystals for us to escape through.

"There it is!"

"Don't shoot us..." I muttered.

I doubted Mary would keep firing at us now that the fuzz was here, but I was still cautious as I piloted the *Krishna* through the hole left by the EML. As I did that, the military started bombarding the area, culling the crystal life-forms rapidly. They seemed to draw heat in the process, as far fewer crystals continued targeting the *Krishna*.

"I can't believe we made it," I sighed, relieved.

"Master Hiro, it looks like Mary's fleet is joining in the attack on the crystals."

"That bitch is shameless..."

"I've never seen Hiro this mad," Elma commented.

I could tell my brow was furrowed like never before. Unfortunately, it was still impossible to report Mary. With no proof that she'd used a Singing Crystal, or that she'd maliciously attacked me, I was shit out of luck. The *Krishna* hadn't traded fire with her directly, so there was no battle record. I could try providing my sensor logs and insist that Mary had gone too far to call her shots cover fire...but I'd be surprised if the guild did anything more than let her off with a warning. Stray bullets tended to hit people when you fired into a melee between "friend" and foe.

The *Krishna* had moved erratically through the crystal horde earlier, and it would've been hard for Mary to see our exact location with her sensors. If she said that she'd fired on the crystals without maliciously targeting me, that would be the end of it.

And, now that the star system fleet was here, I couldn't exactly get away with vengefully hitting her with my own "strays."

"He looks like he's gonna snap," Elma mused.

"Yep. He's angrier than ever..."

"I feel the same way, Hiro, but there's nothing we can do about it. Just give up."

Damn it all. I swear I'm gonna make that lady cry someday.

Epilogue

THE STAR SYSTEM FLEET'S collective power eradicated the summoned crystal life-forms. With that taken care of, it was time to get out of there!

"At least, I wish it was..."

The Milabreeze System's police fleet detained the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*'s crew members, as well as all the mercenaries who'd come as our bodyguards. Although we were technically "detained," we didn't resist and went to the colony containing their HQ without complaint, so they treated us well. They didn't even handcuff us.

In the bleak gray interrogation room, a guy in a dazzling white uniform questioned me over a table. "You didn't possess an illegal Singing Crystal. You just got caught in a chaotic crystal attack. That's your claim?"

"Of course. Even if I wanted to use a Singing Crystal to make money off crystals that appeared, I wouldn't do that near a heavily trafficked hyperlane exit, would I? And I'd never use one when my own mothership and escort were around to get caught up in the mess. Nor stay there alone to give them time to escape. Anyone other than me would've died long before you arrived. Besides, you checked all the ship logs, didn't you?"

"Naturally, but we need direct testimony from the parties involved. I think it's silly to suspect a Gold Star bearer of such a thing, but it's my job. Besides, your crew—and, especially, the other mercenaries you hired—all testified that you warned them during hyperlane travel that crystal life-forms would probably attack upon warp-out. They also told us that they were given very specific instructions in case that *did* happen."

"I'm telling you, it was just a baseless hunch. A feeling in my bones. I have those sometimes. Consider it a Gold Star-decorated platinum-ranker's special ability."

"Is such a thing possible?"

“All I can say is I had a bad feeling. Want to hear about all the times I’ve been jinxed? I could complain for hours.”

“That won’t be necessary.” The interrogator looked genuinely terrified. In his shoes, I certainly wouldn’t want to listen.

I was released from the interrogation room and welcomed to the *Black Lotus* by Elma and Mimi.

“That sure took a while.”

“Thanks for your tireless efforts, Master Hiro.”

“Nice try, but me and my efforts *are* tired.”

They said Tina and Wiska were already running themselves ragged repairing the *Krishna*. On top of that, the twins were eager to work on the *Black Lotus*, since it had fired weapons including its EML.

“What next?” Mimi asked me.

“We’re cleared of charges, so it’s time to get the hell out of this chintzy colony. Maintenance can wait until we’re through the gateway.”

“That’s fair,” Elma agreed. “This was an unexpected detour, but I think we’ll make the Eñors System within our original schedule.”

“Guess I ought to pay the merc fleet a bonus for all the trouble we ran into.”

Fortunately, we’d just scored extra income. Since we’d been cleared of wrongdoing, we’d received a reward based on the number of crystal life-forms we’d destroyed, calculated using our ship’s combat data. The *Krishna* alone had eliminated plenty, so we’d have some nice pocket change even after replacing our four torpedoes.

Rare crystals could be mined from crystal life-form corpses, so the Milabreeze System’s resource-management department was happy to buy them off of us. Add all that together, and we’d made much more money than we spent hiring the mercs, so I didn’t mind giving them hazard pay.

According to reports, our bodyguards had gleefully helped knock out the

crystals, so some of them received official rewards too. Not that I cared all that much.

“I’ll let everyone know we’ll leave soon. Is thirty minutes enough?”

“That ought to be fine. The ones light enough on their feet to be at the colony by now should get back within that time.”

I neither knew nor cared about the mercs who hadn’t made it yet. I was more than willing to leave them behind, especially since I wouldn’t be paying them if they got separated from us.

With that, I headed back toward the *Krishna* with Mimi and Elma. When we reached the hangar, I received a communication on my terminal—not a call, but a holo-message. *What’s this? I can’t think of anyone who’d be sending me messages right now. Is Chris looking to chat or something?* I wondered as I took the terminal out of my jacket pocket. When I looked at the screen, I scowled.

“What? That’s an ugly look.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Look.” I showed the girls the screen. Their brows furrowed, and their cheeks twitched. *Thought you’d react like that.*

“Wonder how she found your address.”

“No idea. It’s not like I told her.”

“Maybe through the guild, or through the mercenaries you hired...?”

“Either way, I can’t ignore this.”

I had Mei check the holo-message for anything weird like malware, just in case, then opened it.

Mary’s upper half appeared on my screen. She looked relaxed and was seemingly sitting in her cockpit. “Hello there. I thought you might refuse a visit, so pardon my messaging you.” I hated this bitch’s stupid spiteful smirk. “Not that I have anything in particular to talk about. But there’s nothing wrong with saying hi, now, is there?” The hologram shot me a theatrical sidelong glance.

“If you don’t have anything to say, don’t send me damn messages!”

“Hiro, the hologram can’t hear you.”

“I don’t like this lady either.” Mimi glared at the hologram, her cheeks uncharacteristically puffed. I wasn’t sure why, but Mary seemed to get Mimi’s goat.

“But what a performance, eh? One ship, facing that horde of crystals all alone... A rank-and-file mercenary like me could *never* pull that off. And, look, isn’t it great that your skill kept *any* friendly fire from hitting you?”

“Shameless as ever!” I snapped. “She was obviously aiming at me.”

“Next time we meet, be a little less of a snob. If a skilled merc like you joined my ranks, things’d be a whole lot easier. Anyway, I say you take me more seriously next time, but call this water under the bridge, hey? That’s how I plan to treat you, at least.” The hologram Mary grinned meaningfully.

“What’s she talking about?” I asked Elma.

“Taking her at face value, it sounds like she doesn’t want you to nurse a grudge against her for the Red Flag stuff. But I think it’d be dangerous to take her at face value.”

“Remains to be seen. At any rate, I’m sure she’d avoid saying anything we could hold against her.”

Elma and Mimi seemed to interpret Mary’s words the same way I did, but we knew it’d be risky to assume she was being upfront. Even if she acted buddy-buddy, she might still just sic her lackeys on us.

“Anyway, if fate brings us together again, let’s be friends,” said the hologram. “Or maybe more?”

“Please don’t be,” Mimi said.

“I’m going to kill that witch,” growled Elma.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I assured them. Unanimous dislike. There you had it. I’d have nothing to do with that Venus flytrap. She was even more of a land mine than Serena. “Let’s forget about her. Space is vast. If we take gateways far enough, we’ll never see her again.”

“Nope. The Empire’s territory is huge.”

“I hope you’re right,” Elma muttered with a distant look in her eyes.

Hey. Cut it out. I know we keep encountering Serena despite taking gateways everywhere, but stop harping on it. Man... Why do we keep bumping into that sad, gorgeous woman? “Enough of that. For now, our first order of business is reaching that gateway and getting far away.”

“It’s honestly really unsatisfying to run away like this.”

“You think we can stand up to a huge pirate gang on our own? We’re not superheroes, merely mercs.”

“‘Merely mercs’ sounds awfully inaccurate,” Mimi objected.

“Mere mercs don’t charge alone into enemy fleets and hordes of crystal life-forms and come out alive, nor do they beat noblemen in swordfights without body mods, *nor* do they reach platinum rank, receive a Gold Star, *and* have His Majesty remember their face and name,” agreed Elma.

“Blah, blah, I can’t hear you.” My ears actually blocked anything I didn’t want to hear. Wasn’t that neat?

While we chatted, trying to forget about Mary, we entered the *Black Lotus* hangar. The twins noticed us at once.

“Oh! Hon! Glad you’re back from the slammer.”

“Thank you for paying your debt to society.”

They jokingly bowed in respect.

“They didn’t jail me. Don’t act like I’m back after twenty years in prison.” I grabbed their work helmets and jostled them a bit.

“Aaaah!”

They had really tacky helmets printed with the Space Dwergr logo—you know, the dwarf guy straddling a retrofuturistic rocket.

“We didn’t take damage, did we?” I asked. “Just resupply. We’re leaving soon.”

“Already done, so no worries there. Ready to launch anytime.”

“Even if the ship wasn’t damaged, that was an intense fight. I’d prefer to give

it a full check...”

“Check it all you want when we’re in a safe place. Thanks for doing the maintenance, you two.”

I patted their helmets, then headed to the *Krishna*.

Time to bid this hellhole goodbye and get to our next destination.

Afterword

THANKS FOR PICKING UP Volume 10 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! We've reached the double digits! Overwhelming!

I've had some physical health problems lately. My lower back pain got so bad it was hard to stand on my own. As soon as that went away, I developed a fever...right before my deadline. That sucked, and I feel bad about the inconvenience it caused. I try to take care of my health, but when it gets bad, it's *really* bad. Worse, right after I finished this manuscript, I fell down the stairs and hurt my butt. When it rains, it pours, right?

Let's put my health struggles aside and talk about my gaming adventures. I finally got my hands on a PlayStation 5! I promised myself I'd buy it through normal channels at a non-scalped price, so I'm overjoyed to have it.

As soon as I got the system, I ran around the deserted streets of Shibuya, enrolled in wizardry school, and revisited the Lands Between. Now I'm trying my hand at alchemy. Collecting materials, making items, using those to make new items, creating powerful gear... I can lose myself for hours. Before I know it, I'm so strong that a single attack item vaporizes enemies. It's just great to have so many games I'm excited to play.

Enough about me. Let's discuss the book. This volume serves as part two of the gang's adventure in the Leafil System, and they settle the score with the pirates who drop-raided the planet. Hiro also settles the score with Tinia, in a way, and levels with the mechanics. Lots going on this volume!

As usual, I wrote extra scenes just for this book, and some things obviously differ from the web novel, since Tinia joins them here. Hiro also runs into someone a lot like himself. As an author, I'd like her to show up more often here and there, but my plans aren't set in stone yet!

Now, the section where I discuss worldbuilding will revolve around this universe's food situation. Hiro and his crew mainly eat food synthesized by automatic cookers that use food cartridges. That's a comparatively classy form

of dining—maybe the third classiest.

The highest-quality meals are real meats, grains, vegetables, *etc.* prepared by specialized cooks. The sky's the limit for price. Even the lowest-brow fast food... say, hamburgers or hot dogs...could be one thousand Ener a pop, or one hundred thousand yen. Real ingredients are extremely expensive in space.

The next-highest-quality foods are cultured meat, artificial meat, and hydroponically grown vegetables. Those can still cost over one hundred Ener per meal—about a tenth of the price of food made with ingredients like real meat.

The third-highest quality is printed food produced with cartridges. Those are far more affordable, costing five to twenty Ener per meal depending on quality. Military rations are often sold for about that price.

The cheapest option is food supplements, which haven't yet appeared in this title. They're essentially pills containing minimal calories and essential nutrients. A bottle of water plus a supplement go for three Ener. Washing the supplement down with water makes it expand in your stomach, preventing hunger. It's like the ultimate dystopian meal. The *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* have supplements on hand as a last resort. Maybe they'll show up before long.

Now, I think it's time to take my leave once again. Thank you to my manager, K; my illustrator, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima; and everyone involved in this book's publication. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this.

Next stop, Volume 11! Come on, number eleven!

—RYUTO

About the Author

Ryuto

A BROWN BEAR LIVING IN HOKKAIDO.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.



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