

REBORN AS A

SPACE MERCENARY

I WOKE UP PILOTING THE
STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL

9



WRITTEN BY
Ryuto

ILLUSTRATED BY
**Tetsuhiro
Nabeshima**

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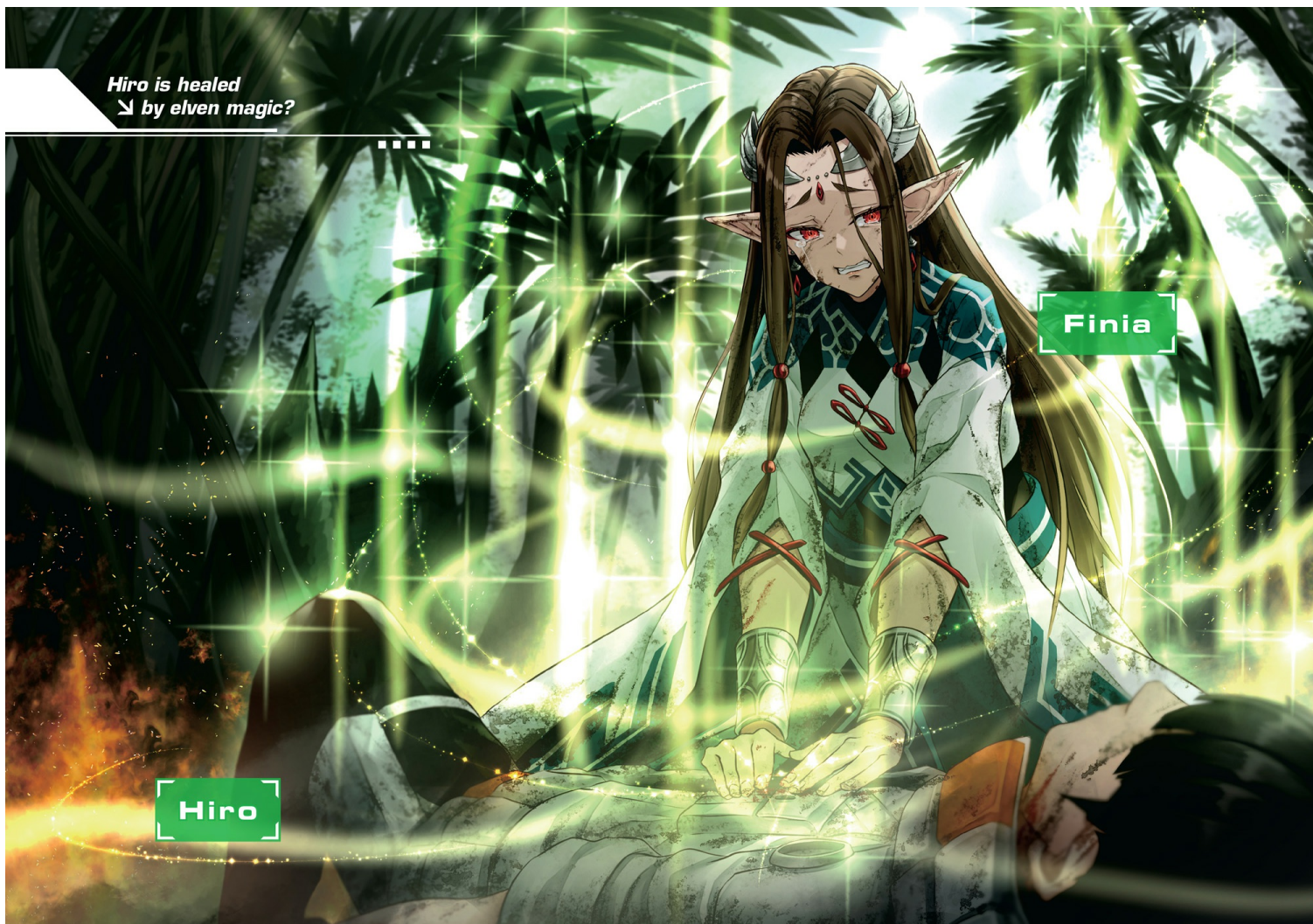


Hiro is healed
↳ by elven magic?

■■■■

Finia

Hiro



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Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.9

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Prologue

I WOKE UP TO THE FEELING of someone poking my cheek.

Through half-open eyes, I saw a familiar ceiling. The lighting was dim and gentle. I tried moving my head to escape the prodding finger, but no dice. My tormentor continued to poke me with deadly precision. At last, I gave up, opened my eyes, and turned to face the perpetrator.

“Morning,” I muttered.

“Good morning.” The perp was none other than Elma. She must have been enjoying herself, because she flashed a Cheshire grin at me.

“What’s with the smirk?”

“Just thinking about how cute and innocent even a mercenary like you looks when you’re asleep.”

“Gimme a break!” Maybe I wasn’t the most rugged-looking dude, but I didn’t think I was baby-faced, either. I’d heard that Asians often looked young to Westerners, though. Maybe that was how Elma saw me.

“I guess I’m just a little boy to an old lady like you, *big sister*,” I said sarcastically. I sat up and stifled a yawn.

Elma looked like a girl in her teens or early twenties, but her pointed ears gave her away as an elf. I didn’t know her exact age, but she was at least twice as old as me. To someone like her, a guy who hadn’t even hit thirty probably seemed like a kid.

Elma didn’t answer. I looked over to see her face frozen in a startled expression. “What?” I’d just been saying what she was already thinking, right? It couldn’t have been a surprise.

“N-nothing. Nope, nothing. Get up, already.” Blushing, Elma whipped around and hurried out of the room. All I could do was watch in confusion.

“What was that all about?” I had zero idea what had gotten into that elf.

“What’d you do to Elma, hon?” The tiny redhead across the table from me looked like a little girl. Hard to believe we were the same age. “You get in a scrap?”

“Not really...?”

After a shower, I’d headed to the dining lounge for breakfast. It was my usual morning routine, but I noticed that Elma was avoiding me at every turn. Every time she saw me, she ducked out of the way.

A blue-haired girl nearly identical to the redhead pressed me. “I saw her go into your room to wake you up. What happened in there?”

Tina and Wiska were twin sisters. They looked young because they weren’t boring old humans, but dwarves. Despite their shrimpy size, they were much stronger than a human man. Anyone who screwed with them, thinking they were just kids, was in for a world of hurt.

“I mean, I don’t think I said or did anything to make her mad. She was poking me in the face and teasing me about looking cute, so I was like, ‘I guess I’m just a little boy to an old lady like you, big sister.’”

“Huh...”

“C’mon. Is that something to get ticked off over?” Thinking it over, maybe I shouldn’t have made the crack about her age, but she wasn’t the type to get upset over something like that. The twins hadn’t known her as long as I had, but they had to know that much, at least.

Tina frowned. “Isn’t Elma the youngest in her family?”

Wiska clasped her hands in recognition. “Ah, yes! You’re right!”

That was true, I recalled. Elma had an older brother and sister, but no younger siblings.

“That could explain it,” said Wiska. “She’s not used to being called ‘older sister.’”

“Huh? Is that a thing?” I was more baffled than ever. Was this some kind of gap moe thing for Elma? Nah... There was no way, right?

“Don’t worry about it,” Tina assured me. “She’ll snap out of it once we land.”

“Yeah, okay. We should be there any minute.”

We’d nearly reached our destination: the Leafil System, mother system to the elves.

I entered the cockpit of the Black Lotus. “Morning, you two.”

“Morning, Master Hiro!”

“Good morning to you, Master.”

The brunette who called me Master Hiro was Mimi. She’d joined my crew after I saved her from a fate worse than death at the first colony I ever visited. She was a total amateur at first, but she’d picked up the skills to run a ship in no time. She’d also developed a knack for wheeling and dealing—in addition to trading our loot, she’d set up a side business as an importer-exporter and was making herself a tidy profit.

Mimi was actually the great-niece of His Majesty the Emperor, so she was basically royalty. Learning that the grandmother she barely remembered was the Emperor’s sister didn’t make her instantly comfy with palace life, though, so she’d ultimately chosen to continue living as a commoner from Tarmein Prime. And now you’re caught up on *her* deal.

As for the beauty with the long, jet-black hair who called me Master, she was named Mei. She looked human at a glance, but she was a Maidroid—an android maid. Money be damned, I’d spared no expense customizing her with the highest-performance upgrades. She had ridiculously tricked-out specs for a Maidroid. Pilot, fighter, and personal assistant all wrapped up in one package, she was my ultimate design. She even taught me swordplay, but unfortunately her teaching style followed the “no pain, no gain” principle...

“We will soon arrive in the Leafil System,” Mei informed me. “Estimated time of arrival is twenty-two minutes.”

“Roger that. Once we reach the system, we’ll deploy the *Krishna* before heading to Leafil Prime. Gotta be prepared for anything.”

“Yes, Master.”

Mei agreed without question, but Mimi cocked her head. “Could we not simply emergency-launch the *Krishna* if we happen to run into a problem?”

“We could do that, yeah. But don’t you think the trip’s been suspiciously smooth so far?”

“That’s true.” The light drained from Mimi’s eyes. I was pretty sure her look of resignation was mirrored on my own face.

“Extrapolating a pattern from past incidents, it is highly probable that we will encounter some form of incident.” Mei voiced what Mimi and I were both thinking. “You wish to set up a formation in advance to respond flexibly to this near inevitability. A logical tactic.”

If even our resident AI could see it coming, it wasn’t just my human intuition. We really did have incredibly bad luck.

“That’s the deal. Sorry, Mei, but I’ll need to leave the ship to you. Mimi, get ready to board the *Krishna*.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” said Mimi.

“Of course,” Mei agreed. “You may leave it to me.”

I turned and left the *Black Lotus* cockpit with Mimi in tow.

“Word of warning,” I said. “Elma’s acting weird.”

“Oh? I wonder what’s wrong.”

Elma was already waiting for us in the *Krishna* cockpit. I’d messaged her from my terminal, and she must’ve headed straight to the *Krishna* when she got my message. The *Black Lotus*’s cockpit was near the very center of the ship, pretty far from the hangar where the *Krishna* awaited us.

“System checks are complete,” Elma said. “I’m running diagnostics now.”

“Thanks. Glad you seem to be feeling better.”

“It was nothing. Forget about it.” Fine by me. Whether she was really over it or just didn’t want to talk about it, the decent thing was to let it go. Not that I

was known for my decency.

I checked the diagnostic readouts. “Perfect,” I muttered to myself. “Good as new.”

With that, Tina and Wiska popped up on the cockpit’s main screen. “What’d you expect?” said Tina, puffing out her modest chest. “We’ve been takin’ good care of it.”

Tina and Wiska were both spectacular engineers. They weren’t official crew members; they’d been dispatched by Space Dwergr, the manufacturer of the *Black Lotus*. But they seemed to be getting used to life with us. I wondered if I could convince them to quit their company jobs one day and join the crew for real.

“You’ve got skills, girls,” I said. “Now, are you mentally prepared?”

“Mentally prepared?” they replied in unison.

“We’re planning to settle in the Leafil System for a while. Pretty soon, we should have some pirate ships for you to take care of.”

They looked at each other, nodded, and pulled a wrench and a spanner out of seemingly nowhere.

Tina fixed me with a look. “In moderation, okay?”

“Yes, moderation,” Wiska agreed. Both of them were taking practice swings with their chosen tools.

“Yes, ma’ams.” I couldn’t say no to those two—but honestly, I didn’t plan to hold back. I wanted all my crew members, official and otherwise, working to the best of their abilities. *C’mon, gang. Time to make money and prosper together!*

Chapter 1:

Kick Things off with a Boarding Attack

THE *BLACK LOTUS* EXITED the eye-strain-inducing kaleidoscope of hyperspace and settled into normal deep space. I was struck by how those star-dusted black depths had come to feel like home. It seemed I was adapting to this universe just fine.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s move out.”

“Opening hangar hatch,” said Mei. “You may launch at any time.”

“Takeoff!”

With a sudden rush of acceleration, the fully-charged electromagnetic catapult ejected the *Krishna* into space. This was always a moment of incomparable exhilaration: the freedom of being thrown into the sea of stars and the power of feeling the *Krishna* under my control.

I forced my attention on the mission. “As we agreed, our destination is the colony Leafil Prime.”

“Roger. Setting course for Leafil Prime.”

“Requesting synchronized FTL drive.”

“Request approved,” Mei replied. “Charging FTL drive now.”

“Set radar range to maximum. Let me know right away if you detect anything suspicious.”

“Aye-aye!” Mimi and Mei replied in unison.

Elma silently and calmly checked the sub-systems. For the moment, I didn’t have much to do; my crew was handling travel, communications, and main and sub-systems. My job was to assume command and pilot the ship when, as usual, trouble found us.

“Counting down. Five, four, three, two, one... Activating faster-than-light drive.”

The FTL drive roared. The *Black Lotus* and *Krishna* rushed through space, leaving the light of the stars behind.

“I just hope my instincts are wrong,” I muttered.

“Me too,” said Mimi. “But knowing our luck...”

“It’s remarkable,” Elma said. “Surely no one gets into as many tight spots as we do.”

Mimi chuckled bitterly—then gasped. She used her console to share her screen, revealing that the subspace radar had detected other ships. *That soon, huh?*

“They have criminal tags,” Elma observed.

Mimi nodded. “That means they’ve attacked the local star system or something like that.”

“Exactly.”

While I listened to their conversation, I swiftly tapped on my console to de-synchronize the *Krishna* from the *Black Lotus*’s FTL drive, and corrected our course toward the criminal-tagged ship.

“*Black Lotus*,” I ordered, “follow behind us.”

“Understood,” came the response. “Good luck in your battle.”

It was hard to steer ships at FTL speeds with any finesse, but a small craft like the *Krishna* could maneuver far better than a behemoth like the *Black Lotus*. If we had to track a ship through FTL, the *Krishna* was our better bet.

“Their movements are sluggish,” said Mimi. “It must be a decently sized ship.”

“Get behind them,” Elma replied. “Interdictor on standby.”

“This will be our first time interdicting another ship!”

Interdicting meant forcibly jamming a ship’s FTL drive. I didn’t understand the physics of it, but it basically worked by directing a gravity-control device called an interdictor at the target. Of course, once our target realized what we were trying to do, they’d do whatever they could to escape. In other words, this was a dogfight at beyond light speed.

I laughed. “Ha ha! Where do you think you’re going?”

The other ship accelerated and decelerated, swerving apparently at random, trying to escape my sights. But I wouldn’t let them get away that easily. As I understood it, deceleration would only speed up the interdiction, making it a dangerous gamble. Our target was getting desperate.

Our interdictor connected with the craft. “Success!” said Elma.

I leaned forward. “These could be dangerous criminals, so let’s not screw around here. Prepare to engage.”

“Aye-aye!” Mimi and Elma replied.

The interdiction didn’t take long. As it succeeded, both the *Krishna* and the other ship were dragged back to normal space with a jolt and a boom. The process was supposed to be much rougher on the interdicted ship.

Sure enough, the large craft onscreen—a pirate ship, if first impressions could be trusted—was listing and shaking violently.

“Tragic to watch, isn’t it?” I cued our weapons system.

Ships interdicted out of FTL drive were subjected to intense multi-axis rotation. It had something to do with the kinetic energy released by the interruption of FTL propulsion, but, again, hyperspace physics wasn’t my strong suit. The point was, an interdicted ship was left exposed to attack. If the crew couldn’t or wouldn’t flee, their best bet was to decelerate and accept the interdiction.

I’d been subjected to many interdictions since my arrival in this universe, and I’d backed down every time. This ship was about to find out why.

“Let’s break those shields now.”

“Good idea.”

There was no point going easy on a ship tagged as criminal. I fired mercilessly at the bulky craft as it spun helplessly. By this point, the interior—except for the cockpit, which would be protected by the inertial control system—had to be a mess.

“Enemy shields down,” Elma announced.

“Let’s get their thrusters.”

After ripping away their shields, the next step was to kneecap them. Firing from the pirate ship’s blind spots, we took out the thrusters, then demolished the defensive turrets at our leisure. Soon they’d be laid wide open.

“B-back off!” a voice screamed over our comms. “We’ve got hostages here!”

“What do I care?” I answered. “We’ll get paid the same bounty no matter what.” For all I knew, the pirate was bluffing—and in any case, we didn’t have a secure way to save anyone. We were mercenaries; this wasn’t a rescue mission.

Hostages—whether they were virtuous saints, innocent children, or titled imperial nobility—had to be treated as effectively dead from the moment they were taken on board a pirate ship. Space law didn’t hold anyone culpable for noncombatants killed while taking down a criminal ship. Otherwise, it would just encourage pirates to use human shields.

“Only a rookie would back off from an empty threat like that,” I said.

“We can’t worry about every casualty,” Elma agreed. Like me, she wasn’t into moral dilemmas.

Mimi sucked in her breath but said nothing. With the battle still underway, I couldn’t turn to see her face, but I guessed she was looking pale. Well, it took time to get used to mercenary values. Now that I thought about it, maybe I’d gotten a little too flippant about the collateral damage of these raids. Was I becoming insensitive to death?

The thought echoed through my head as I continued to disable the ship, blasting at thrusters, turrets, and missile launchers.

Elma spoke up. “We’ve broken their arms and legs. What’s next?”

No use overthinking things, I decided. Otherwise, there was no way I could adapt to life as a mercenary in this ruthless galaxy.

“Our next move, huh? If whatever military fleet tagged them shows up, we can leave the rest to them. But...” Before I could finish, there was a boom and a vast black shape materialized. I knew that sight well: it was the *Black Lotus*. “But since the *Lotus* beat them here, let’s keep the fun for ourselves. I oughta get in

a hand-to-hand fight once in a while, keep my skills up.”

“It’ll be dangerous,” Elma warned.

“They’re just common pirates. How tough can they be? We’ll have battle bots on our side, too—not to mention Mimi’s combat training.”

Mimi looked at me, the tension written on her face. Sure, she’d mastered the simulations, but this would be her first real combat experience. Still, it had to happen sometime.

Get ready, I silently advised her. This is it.

I screwed up immediately.

The plan was for me to board the pirate ship when the *Krishna* docked. Meanwhile, the *Black Lotus* would release drop pods to back me up with battle bots. Trouble was, I’d left my power armor back on the *Lotus*. I had the bare minimum of armor for a raid: a portable shield and combat armor with a pressurization function that would keep me alive for maybe three hours if I got tossed into space.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” Mimi said. “You don’t need to risk your life for this.”

“Don’t worry about me.” I checked my gear. “If worst comes to worst, I’ll cower in the corner and let the battle bots clean up.”

I grabbed my two swords and my beloved laser gun. For peripherals, I had a backup energy pack, three shock grenades, and two plasma grenades, not to mention my chameleon thermal mount. I considered taking a laser rifle, but long weapons were awkward to handle in the cramped corridors of a typical pirate ship. The laser gun was better suited to the type of combat I planned to face.

“Docking complete,” Elma announced over comms. “Breaching.”

“Drop pods are breaching, too,” Mei added. “We are ready to infiltrate.”

“Send the bots in first. While the pirates are busy with them, I’ll seize the cockpit.”

“Aye-aye. May a safe victory await you, Master.” The *Krishna* pierced the enemy ship’s hatch and hull.

“Breaching complete,” Elma said. “Be careful.”

“Roger that. Going in.”

I opened first the *Krishna*’s hatch, then the external hatch of the breached ship, and stepped through. I found myself somewhere in the pirate ship’s hold. Maybe because the crew was off dealing with the battle bots, I received no warm reception.

I reported back. “This is Snake. I’m in.”

“Don’t you mean Mouse?”

“It’s Mouse here?” Okay, so in this universe, mice were considered the infiltrators instead of snakes. “It looks like I’m in the hold. Can I get a map of the ship?”

“Umm...it looks like there should be a console on the wall to your left. Connect your comms terminal to it.”

“Will do.”

I found the console and connected it to my handheld terminal with a short cord. Through this hookup, Mimi could hack the pirate ship.

It didn’t take her long. “Kay, got it. I’ll display the information on your HUD.” A 3D map of the ship appeared inside my airtight combat helmet. The map was extensive, matching the size of the ship.

“Find me a route to the cockpit and throw it up on my screen. In the meantime, I’ll get to work.”

“Aye-aye!” Her voice quavered.

“Calm down, Mimi. Take three deep breaths and focus.”

Through the communicator, I heard Mimi breathe. I headed for an exit that, according to the map, would take me out of the hold. I was curious to see what kind of loot the ship was hauling, but my first priority was to take down those pirates.

“Leaving the hold now,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll be here on backup.”

“Be careful, Hiro.”

Backed by my crew’s words, I unholstered my laser gun and disengaged the safety.

I couldn’t say I was all that impressed by the ship’s security. Admittedly, though, a better pirate crew than this one would’ve had trouble handling a full-bore assault from our bots. The information-gathering tool Mimi had installed—a program that might’ve been called malware or a virus in my world—picked up the pirates’ comms and delivered them to my ears.

“Damn these tin cans! Joyce is down!”

“If you’re still alive, pull back! Leeroy, shock grenade!”

“Leave it to—*gyaaaaah!*”

“Dammit! The tin cans are screwing us sideways!”

“When did our little Mimi get to be a master hacker?” I chuckled. “Good job.”

“I’m not!” came the response from the *Black Lotus*. “I just used the cracking tool Mei sent me.”

“Well, it’s a pirate ship,” Elma said. “Common market cracking tools can usually deal with them. Since pirates typically aren’t working with legal equipment, it’s hard for them to update their software against the latest attacks.”

“Makes sense.” Most pirate ships were vessels that pirates had shot down, patched up, and jury-rigged back to space worthy condition to the best of their often-meager abilities. They couldn’t upgrade the security software for fear of being tracked by authorities, so their ships tended to be vulnerable to cyber attacks. Every once in a while, a pirate with serious tech skills could kludge together a system as well-guarded as a military ship’s, but that was rare.

“Either way, it’s a huge help,” I said to Mimi.

“Happy to help, Master Hiro. I’ll do my best to—hang on. At the T-shaped intersection up ahead, take the passage on the left.”

“Will that get me to the cockpit?”

“No, not quite. It’s the room where they’re holding the hostages. The surveillance camera shows...” Mimi’s voice quavered again. “Some of them are badly injured.”

Injured victims, huh? I’d brought first aid nanomachines with me, but only three. They were my lifeline if I got the wrong end of a sword or a laser, so I didn’t want to waste them.

Still...

I sighed. “Can you at least fool the cameras for me while I go in?”

“Of course! Leave it to me. There’s a maintenance socket below the keypad by the door.”

“Got it.” I approached the door and jacked my terminal into the socket. In seconds, the door opened, and I slipped in. The door shut behind me. I’d be an idiot to lock myself inside a pirate brig, but we’d just disengaged the lock.

The small space was crammed with about ten people, all shackled by their hands and feet. “I’m the mercenary raiding this ship,” I announced. “I guess you could say I’m here to save you.”

As I spoke, I got a better look at the hostages. They were all elves: beautiful men and women with long ears like Elma’s. It looked like all elves were beautiful, just like elves in my world’s folklore were said to be. Or had the pirates kept the prettiest ones to be their playthings? To a man—or maybe I should say *to a woman*, since the group was mostly female—they glared warily at the sudden intruder.

“I’ve hobbled the ship and knocked out its weapons,” I continued. “My battle bots are dealing with the pirates as we speak. Authorities of some sort should show up soon. Consider yourselves saved.”

The loveliest of the hostages stood up. “Will we be able to return to our homeland?” Her boldness impressed me. After whatever hell they’d been

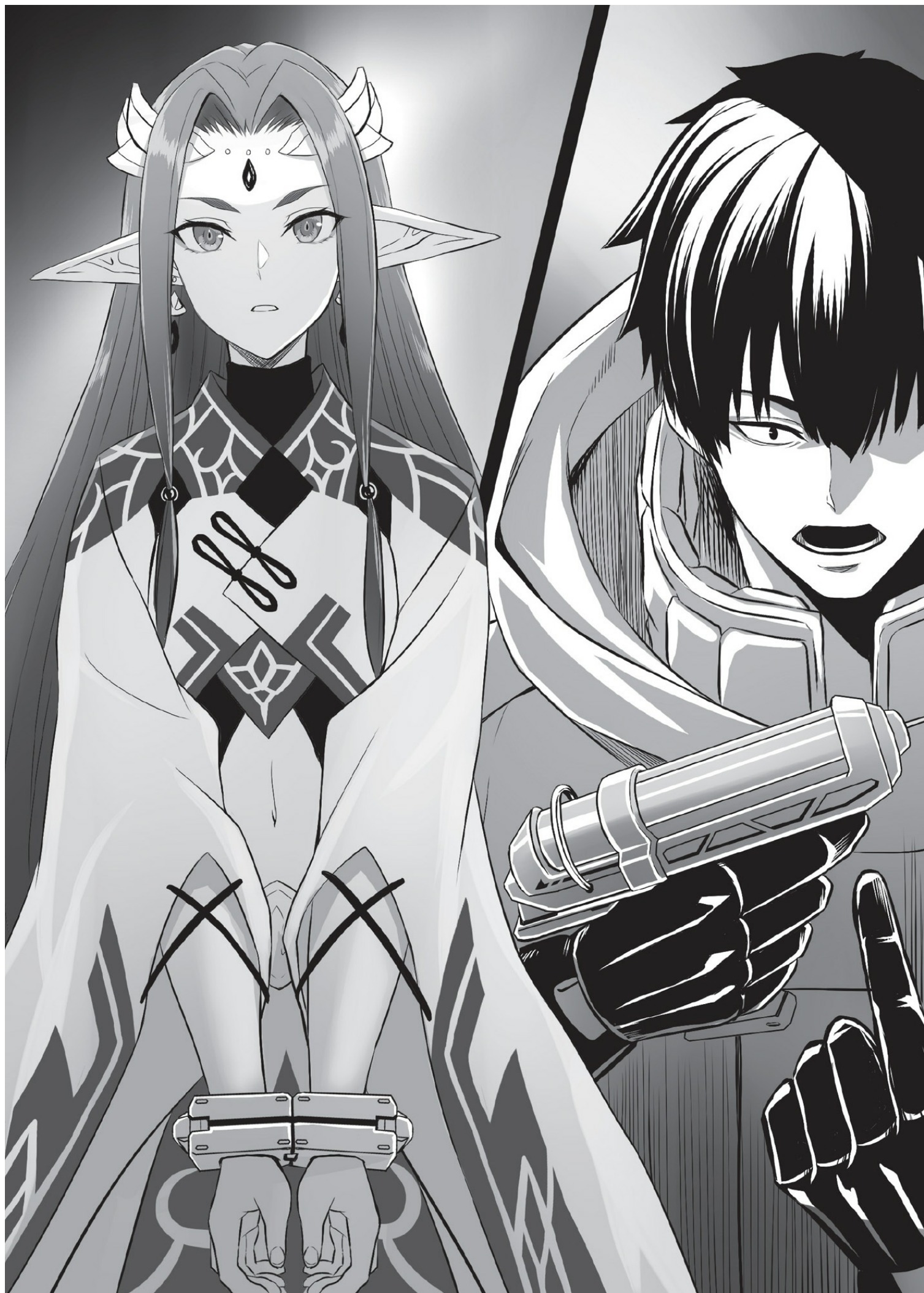
through, she still spoke calmly.

I nodded. “Probably. But I don’t know how you ended up on this ship, so I can’t say anything for sure. You should at least be able to get passage to Leafil Prime. After that, I guess it’s up to the planetary government. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, huh? One of my crew members told me some of you are injured, right? Before I move on, I might be able to save some lives.”

I pulled out my first aid nanomachines. The girl’s eyes narrowed. “These aren’t weapons,” I added quickly, realizing how much they looked like guns. “They’re medical nanomachines.”

Even in her shackles, she looked prepared to fight me if I made one wrong move. “Medical nanos? What are those?”

No way, she hadn’t heard of medical nanomachines? I’d assumed everyone in this universe was familiar with nano technology. Now that I considered it, the hostages’ clothes didn’t look very futuristic. They were almost dressed like normal people from my world. Was this a group of people who just didn’t interact much with modern technology?



“Uh...” Coming from a relatively primitive world myself, I wasn’t the best person to explain this. “Basically, it’s medicine. It closes wounds, soothes pain, stops bleeding, and keeps you alive. If you clear a path for me, I can treat your injured.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the elf girl stepped out of my way. Lying on the floor was a man whose left shoulder and right side were charred and bleeding. “Looks like a mix of laser burns and direct stab wounds,” I said. “That’s rough. But this should make things easier for you.”

I pressed one of the nanos against the man’s skin. I didn’t understand the science of medical nanotech too well, but if this was a game, this item would heal up to 60 percent of HP. It could only help, not hurt.

Once I was finished with first aid, I stood up. “All right. We’re in deep space with a battle raging on board. I suggest you barricade yourselves in here until the smoke clears. I’ll tag this room as ‘in need of rescue,’ so once the authorities show up, they’ll know where to go.”

The girl nodded curtly. “Understood. But what about you?”

“I’m off to seize the cockpit. I want to finish this job before the officials come running.”

If I didn’t finish this before the Imperial Fleet or local forces arrived, I’d make less money. Even without putting a price on the illegal elven slaves, there was a whole lot of cargo on board. Space pirate cargo was usually cheap stuff—food cartridges, rotgut alcohol, low-grade drugs—but when a large ship like this was stuffed to the gills with it, it could add up to a nice sum of cash.

Beyond that, the ship itself was worth a bundle, provided we didn’t damage any vital systems. I had no idea if there was much demand for a large spaceship in these parts, but I guessed it was worth at least a million Ener.

“Later,” I told the hostages. “You hold tight until somebody responsible shows up.”

“May I ask your name?” said the girl.

I turned back. “Captain Hiro, platinum-rank mercenary and captain of the

Krishna."

With the hostages taken care of, I headed for the cockpit. Pirate communications had gone nearly silent, which probably meant there weren't many left alive. Our battle bots had done their work.

Our communications, on the other hand, stayed lively.

"You're nearing the cockpit, Master Hiro."

"Captain, the star system army's here."

I jogged down a filthy corridor lined with scraps of paper and broken glass. "Got it. I'll finish this quick." How had the pirates lived in this dirty, dimly lit warren for weeks on end? Would it have killed them to pick up after themselves?

"The door's unlocked," Mimi informed me.

"Okay. Here goes." I sucked in a breath, threw open the door, and charged in.

"What? You—"

I held my breath. Time seemed to slow down. I aimed my laser gun and fired at the first pirate to notice me. A lethal dose of laser stuck him in the brow, blasting him backward. One down, two to go.

Alerted by the laser blast, the pirate in the captain's seat turned, making himself an easy target. I fired at him as I charged forward. He was thrown out of his seat and to the floor.

The final pirate, sitting in the operator's seat, tried to stand, but I'd already closed in on him. Still holding the laser gun in my right hand, I whipped out a sword with my left. I sliced off his right hand, then reversed the blade to stab through his ribcage and skewer his heart.

Flesh and bone might have slowed an ordinary sword, but my reinforced particle blade could penetrate even power armor. It had no trouble piercing the pirate's chest and digging deep into his heart. I shoved the blade through his back to sever his spine, delivering the final blow.

Three pirates killed in one breath. “Phew!” That last one was messy. The cockpit was drenched in blood. No doubt Tina and Wiska would complain about that later. “Hiro here. Cockpit’s secure. Mimi, help me take over control of the ship’s systems.”

“Yes, Master Hiro.”

I swung my sword to shake off the worst of the blood, returned it to its sheath, and jacked my terminal into the cockpit’s console. I opened the communications app and used wide-field comms to call out to the fleet that had just arrived.

“This is platinum-rank mercenary Captain Hiro. I’ve seized the pirate vessel. Currently, battle bots under our command are cleaning up the remaining enemy forces. We’ve confirmed civilian prisoners on board, some of them injured. I’ll share the map of the ship. Requesting rescue and transport of the civilians.”

With that, we had a moment’s peace again. Once the bots finished their sweep, we’d just need to hand over the prisoners and any pirates who were still alive. After that, we’d have to start repairs on the ship, tow it to Leafil Prime with the *Black Lotus*, inventory the cargo for sale...

Man, I know I asked for it, but being a merc is a whole lot of work.

After handing over the pirates, we were fortunately *not* detained and interrogated by the local system’s police fleet.

As soon as the fleet pulled up, I surrendered the hostages and the surviving pirates to their authority. We used the *Black Lotus* to tow the pirate ship to Leafil Prime. In orbit, we were greeted by a car from police HQ. The top brass, General Gem Dar, had come out personally to welcome us.

General Gem Dar was a ruggedly handsome elf with a well-maintained mustache. As was usually the case with elves, I couldn’t begin to guess how old he was. He bowed his head to me. “Allow me to thank you and apologize for forcing you to clean up our mess.”

“Don’t worry about it. We just happened by—and it’s not like we didn’t get

anything out of it.”

I’d boarded the ship to capture pirate loot and get in a little hand-to-hand combat. I hadn’t planned on rescuing hostages. Being thanked for it felt wrong. I’d done it because I’d felt like it. If I’d been in a different mood, I might just as well have blown up the ship and killed everyone on board.

“If you insist, we’ll leave it at that,” the general replied. “But please know that we are deeply grateful. Thanks to you, innocent lives have been saved.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.”

The sheer force of his gratitude was overwhelming. It really had been just a whim on my part, but that didn’t seem to matter to him. Meanwhile, I’d gotten what I wanted: a ship full of booty, freshly honed combat skills, and a chance to test Mimi on a combat support crew.

“Expect a bonus and a letter of thanks on top of the posted reward,” said the general. “The paperwork will take a few days to process. In the meantime, feel free to take some shore leave here.”

“Sure. We were planning to stay a while, so that works out fine.”

“In this colony? If you don’t mind, may I ask what brought you to the Leafil System?”

“Sightseeing, basically. See, we have an elf on our crew. She’s told us so much about the elven homeworld, we thought we might as well try out the cuisine and drinks, get our hands on rare trade goods, and take in the sights. Fortunately, three of us—myself included—have first-class landowner’s rights, so we can make landing requests.”

“Oh ho. Three of you?” General Gem Dar stroked his chin, looking impressed.

I found the Grakkan Empire’s citizenship system weird and impenetrable, but first-class landowner’s rights were simple enough. Citizens with those rights could set foot on any planet or colony as long as they filled out the paperwork, provided there weren’t any specific restrictions in place. If they wanted, they could even settle there permanently. If they were just visiting, they could escort up to two additional people without those guests needing the same qualifications.

Since Mimi, Elma, and I all had first-class rights, we'd be able to bring Mei, Tina, and Wiska along with us. Or did Mei not count as a person because she was a Maidroid? This was why Grakkan law always ended up confusing me.

"But this works out quite conveniently!" The general beamed. "Among the prisoners you saved are the son and daughter of an influential clan on Leafil IV."

"Huh. Really?" I recalled the beautiful girl who'd stood up to me in the prisoner's hold and the handsome, wounded man I'd healed. They'd looked like classy types. At any rate, it sounded like I'd get a hearty welcome from some local bigwigs for saving their kids. "I'll think about that when the time comes—if it ever does."

"Fine, fine. But I suspect you'll be hearing from some grateful families. You'd best be ready for that."

"Gotcha."

"Hoo, man!" I groaned dramatically. "My shoulders are stiff after all that."

"Yeah, yeah. Good work."

"Well done, Master Hiro."

"Keep it up, boss!"

"Thanks for all you do."

The crew was waiting for me in the *Black Lotus's* dining area when I returned. As I sat down, Mei positioned herself behind me and treated my shoulders to a perfect massage. The quality of her service never ceased to amaze me.

"So how are things progressing over here?" I asked Elma.

"I'm working on the landing request right now. I don't know why these things always require so much busywork..."

"That's government bureaucracy for you. Mimi?"

"I'm in the process of selling off our cargo, including everything we salvaged from the pirate ship. There's a lot, so it'll take a while."

"Their cargo hold was packed, that's for sure. If there's anything that won't

fetch a good price around here, hang on to it. The *Black Lotus* has plenty of storage space.”

“Understood.”

Mimi had become a canny operator on the trade networks. Before long, I might need to review her pay rate.

“How about you, Tina and Wiska?”

“We’re makin’ plans to renovate the ship you brought in.”

“Underneath the grime, it’s surprisingly well-built,” Wiska added. “Once we clean it out, make repairs, swap out plating, and replace the damaged thrusters and equipment, we’ll have a spaceworthy vessel on our hands.”

“Well, I’ll leave that to you professionals. Bill for part costs as usual.”

“Roger that!”

“Yes, sir.”

Naturally, repairs cost money. For starters, Tina and Wiska would need to order replacements for the parts we’d demolished. Even if they rebuilt from scratch, the materials wouldn’t come cheap. Since we’d only taken one ship in this raid, we couldn’t cannibalize other ships for parts. A full renovation would take a lot of time and money. But the profit would easily outstrip the cost, and Tina and Wiska knew how to maximize that profit.

“Okay, then,” I said. “Sounds like I can trust all of you to take it from here.”

“Feel free to lend a hand.” Elma flashed me a challenging smile, but I ignored her. There wasn’t much I could do to speed up her work filling out forms.

“Ready for me to report on my meeting with the general? Not that there were any big surprises, but...” I launched into a brief recap, adding that there had been people from a powerful clan on Leafil IV—our very destination—among the hostages. Laughter broke out around the table.

“I see.”

“And there it is.”

“Looks like you win, Wis!”

They didn't tell me what that was about, but it was easy to guess that, while I'd been off meeting the general, they'd been betting on what kind of trouble was about to come our way next. If you think it sounds like typical mercenary behavior to place bets on every little bit of ship's business, well, you're right. And Elma was absolutely the instigator.

I waved it off. "No matter how powerful they are, I'm sure they're nothing compared to the Imperial family."

Tina chuckled. "You really wanna bring *that* up?"

I told myself not to worry. Local clans were usually big fish in tiny ponds, with next to no power outside their own planets. Even the few clan leaders with Imperial titles were small potatoes compared to the Emperor and the high nobility. In Earth terms, a powerful clan on Leafil IV would be like...local city council reps or something.

"Don't sneer at them," warned Elma. "Leafil may be just one system in the vast Empire, but mother planets are special. Clans dig their roots deep, and the chieftains and their families... Well, to spacefarers, Leafil IV looks like one of countless shining specks scattered across the galaxies, but to the people who have lived their lives there and never ventured off-planet, that world is their entire universe."

Mimi, Tina, and I mulled over Elma's words.

"Hmm..."

"You have a point."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

Wiska sat silently pondering.

"That said," I added, "we ought to have a hero's welcome waiting for us. The locals shouldn't give us any trouble. Still, be careful. It's all too easy to screw up cross-cultural communication."

Like when humans raise a white flag in surrender, but aliens see it as a declaration of ultimate war, resulting in a bloodbath. I think I saw that in an anime once.

“In that case,” said Mimi, “we’ll have to rely on you, Elma!”

“I only came here once, long ago,” said Elma. “I don’t know that much.”

“If they have a unique culture, there must be etiquette guides for visitors,” I said. “Mei, look into that for me.”

“Yes, Master. You may leave it to me.”

And so, our first day in the Leafil System ended—with forms, busywork, inquiries, and requests for documents. Even mercenary life has slow evenings.

Chapter 2: Leafil Prime

COMPARED TO THE UPROAR that surrounded our arrival in the Leafil System, our second morning—according to Leafil Prime standard time, that is—started off peacefully.

“Goof horning...”

“Yep. Good morning.”

Mimi and I rolled out of bed together, washed and dressed, and headed for the *Black Lotus* dining room, where we had breakfast with Elma, the twins, and Mei. After that, all of us except for Mei worked up a sweat in the *Black Lotus* training room before dispersing.

“If I have things right,” I said, looking at Elma and Mimi, “the three of us are free for the rest of the day.”

Elma nodded. “I finished selling off the cargo last night.”

“And I submitted our landing request,” said Mimi. “Now we just wait for the government to process it.”

Tina sighed. “As for Wisk and me, now’s when our work really begins.”

“It should be an easier job than last time, though,” Wiska added.

Tina and Wiska had ordered some parts and manufactured others with the replicators. They were ready to start renovation on the pirate ship. Fortunately, they wouldn’t be working alone. In addition to deploying the maintenance bots, they were planning to strip the battle bots of their weapons and kit them out as general-purpose work bots. Apparently they’d modified maintenance bot software from Eagle Dynamics to give the battle bots a work mode...or something like that.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked. “I don’t want our battle bots to start sweeping the floor in the middle of a firefight.”

“Don’t sweat it! All our bots come from the same manufacturer, so the programming is compatible.”

“It runs as an independent subroutine. Nothing to worry about.”

They seemed sure of themselves, so I let them hack away. Mei kept the battle bots primed, after all, and she’d let me know if she noticed any problems with them. In the end, I had to trust my crew.

“What’re y’all gonna do today, hon?”

“Well...” Good question. “First, I thought we’d stop by the local mercenary guild and the military headquarters to collect our rewards for yesterday’s outing. After that, I guess we’ll check out the town. If we find any interesting liquor, I’ll bring you a bottle or two.”

“Yes, thank you! The elven mother system ought to have stellar offerings.”

“They might not do it like us, but those elves love boozin’ it up.”

“So I hear.” I glanced over at Elma.

She responded with a point-blank glare. “What?” Her voice was sharp, but the angle of her ears told me she wasn’t really upset. It was just banter.

“What about you, Mei?” I asked.

“I will remain in the ship and take care of some chores.”

“In that case, I leave the *Black Lotus* in your care.”

“Of course, Master.”

With that, I headed into town with Mimi and Elma.

We’d agreed to leave together, but, as usual, I finished getting ready way ahead of the girls. I went back to my quarters, armed myself with my laser gun and two swords, and was good to go. I hung out in the lounge until Mimi and Elma showed up. At last we were on our way.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, with it being the mother system and all,” I said, “but you really notice way more elves here.”

“I know,” said Mimi. “There are so many, right?”

Elsewhere in the Empire, you weren’t likely to see more than one or two elves in a crowd. Here, at least ten percent of the people walking by had the telltale pointy ears.

“But for some reason,” I said, “I feel a lot of eyes on us.”

Elma and Mimi looked at me. “Well, yeah,” said Mimi. “We stand out.”

“Of course,” Elma agreed.

Were people staring because I was walking down the street with a babe on either side? They *were* a couple of hotties.

“Whatever you’re thinking,” said Mimi, “I bet it’s totally off the mark. Everyone’s staring at *you*. A mercenary armed to the teeth doesn’t exactly blend in around here.”

“Besides,” Elma added, “people are bound to recognize you from the tournament. Remember, it was broadcast across the entire Grakkan Empire.”

“Oh, yeah. So I’m famous now, is that what you’re saying?”

“*Famous* is putting it mildly.”

“You’re the hottest mercenary out there right now, Master Hiro!”

“Huh?” How’d that happen? I was just a rich, violent *petit bourgeois* tournament champ and space mercenary... Okay, I could see how people might be into that.

“I’m just now realizing I’m kind of a big deal.”

“Obviously.” Mimi snorted. “Why do you think that general kowtowed to you? You really are dense in the weirdest ways.”

“So true,” said Elma.

“Gee, thanks for the compliments.”

We walked and talked, ignoring the stares, until we found the mercenary guild building. It wasn’t very impressive; I’d go so far as to call it boring. The only notable feature was an over abundance of potted plants. Otherwise, it looked like the mercenary guilds you’d find in any other system.

“I was expecting something a little more exotic,” I said.

“It’s very normal,” Elma agreed.

“Who cares?” said Mimi. “Let’s do business.”

A young woman was waiting at the counter. As we approached, her face froze so stiffly that I felt sorry for her.

“Hey, c’mon,” I said. “No need to be scared. You’re making me feel guilty.”

“Ah! Um...er...sorry—eep!” A man stepped up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder, making her yelp. Tears welled up in her eyes. Poor girl.

“You go ahead and take a break,” the man said. “I’ll take care of this group.”

“Y-yessir.” The girl nodded like a broken robot and darted away.

The man, an elf, smiled at us. “Welcome to Leafil Prime, Captain Hiro.”

“Thanks. Sorry for scaring your employee.”

“No, no, don’t you worry. She just started working here, and she loses her nerve around our more...hardened clients.” He grinned wryly, shaking his head, then gave us a slight bow. “So. What brings you here today? Come to take on work, perhaps?”

“Nah. Just checking in to let the guild know we’ll be in the Leafil System for a while. It’ll make things easier if we get to know each other now, right?”

“I must agree. I admit I have the advantage, as your reputation precedes you.”

“Yeah? And what do you think of me?”

“The platinum-ranker who everyone’s been talking about seems to be, as the rumors indicate, a good guy.”

“Uh...huh.” A good guy? Did people really feel that way about me? Thinking back, it was easy to misinterpret some of my deeds as heroic. And it wasn’t like I dabbled in dirty work *that* often.

Elma stared in disbelief. “A good guy? Really?” Mimi looked dubious, too. I felt myself starting to blush. *C’mon, girls, gimme a break. I’m a pretty stand-up guy for a mercenary, right?*

“Missions accomplished flawlessly, outstanding skill as a combat pilot, first-rate skills in hand-to-hand combat. A ruthless hunter of pirates, with a good relationship with the Imperial Fleet. Uninterested in shady work, no reports of collaborating with pirates.” The elf rattled off my qualifications with the ease of an expert in the field. “Reliable, respectable, never causes undue trouble. As far as the mercenary guild is concerned, that’s the definition of a good guy.”

“Mm...” Mimi thought it over. “Fair enough. In that regard, Hiro isn’t like most mercenaries. He doesn’t have that outlaw streak.”

“You better believe it,” I said. “I’m downright upstanding.” If you wanted to put it kindly, I had a policy of taking the diplomatic approach whenever possible. If you wanted to put it less kindly, well, better to bend than to break.

I’d been in this universe for a while, and I’d gotten an idea of what common mercenaries were like, how little they thought before they acted. That just wasn’t my style. I wasn’t into carousing, wasting my time and money on booze, brawls, and babes. Not that I had anything against the last category, but I was good on that front. I’d decided a while back I wasn’t here to live a rock-star lifestyle. I wanted to make a bundle and move up in the world, sure, but all the trouble I was always getting caught up in had a way of taking care of that for me.

“Enough about me,” I said. “Let’s go over my crew’s plans in the Leafil System.”

“Gladly.”

“This is mainly a pleasure trip for us. We’ve heard interesting things about the area, so we’ve put in a request to land on Leafil IV. We’re hoping to have a little vacation.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. Leafil IV is rich in natural beauty. Resting up between conquests, I presume?”

“Pretty much.” I didn’t mention that my personal goal, besides seeing the sights, was to look for soda.

“May we presume you won’t be seeking mercenary work from us, then?”

“We’ll hang around here until our landing request is accepted. If it takes

longer than we expect, we might shoot down some pirates here and there for pocket money... If the timing works out, we could accept a transport or bodyguard request. That's about it, though."

"I see. What a shame. But you've already handled one major thorn in our side, so it'd be churlish for me to object."

"A major thorn...? Oh, the pirates. They just happened to get in our way, but I heard they took some big shots prisoner."

The elf nodded firmly. "Correct. That was an especially troublesome crew of pirate slavers. They set up an outpost in the Leafil System to kidnap elves for the black market. Those 'big shots,' as you put it, were abducted after a vicious battle. One of the chieftains showed up here so furious I thought he'd burst a blood vessel. At any rate, we were able to raid the pirates' outpost before they could leave the system, but that ship escaped with some of their most valuable captives. Fortunately, you intercepted them in the nick of time."

"I see. The police arrested the surviving pirates, didn't they?"

"They shouldn't expect any mercy," Elma interrupted. "I bet they're quaking in their stolen boots right now."

"That's karma for you." Mimi was unusually dry in her response. I remembered how horrified she'd been by the imprisoned and injured hostages. Of course she wouldn't sympathize with the people who'd done that to them.

"If you're interested," said the elven man, "feel free to look over this file. It's the most recently updated report on the case."

"Are you sure? Isn't that leaking internal information or something?"

"We plan to release this to the media, so it's cleared for public consumption. You might get a few extra details, that's all."

"Ah, okay. I'll take a look at it later, then. By the way, any word on our reward?"

The elf checked the countertop holo-display. He shook his head. "Not quite yet, it seems. The star system army, Imperial Fleet, and Chieftains' Alliance will probably take some time to come to an agreement. Tomorrow at the earliest..."

No, perhaps the day after.”

It seemed strange to take that long to make a payout. And this was the first I’d heard of a “Chieftains’ Alliance.”

“They have to settle on a division of payment as well as an amount,” he explained. “The local government’s purse isn’t exactly full, and the Imperial Fleet tends to be stingy. As for the Chieftains’ Alliance, they’re tightfisted and not especially friendly with the other two parties.”

“Sounds like one big pain in the ass to me.”

“You’ll find the mother planet’s government has considerably more power here than in most systems. Please be patient. The chieftains may be tightfisted, but they aren’t narrow-minded. If I know them, they’ll do their best to squeeze out extra money on your behalf from the star system army and the Imperial Fleet. They’re quite grateful toward you, Captain Hiro. When civilians are captured by pirates, they’re presumed lost. Few mercenaries would risk boarding a pirate ship to save hostages.”

I shrugged. “Just a whim I had on the fly.”

“Hitting on the optimal solution ‘on the fly’ is a talent in itself. There truly is something special about the platinum rank.”

“Please, that’s enough. You don’t know how right you are.” I stole a glance at Mimi and Elena. As I expected, they both wore pained smiles. I was sure I had the same look. We knew better than anyone what was so *special* about us.

Once we left the mercenary guild, we canceled our visit to the army garrison in favor of strolling around together. We’d had enough business for the day. If we found any nice stores, we might indulge in some shopping.

“Somehow,” I said, “this feels different from other colonies.”

“Doesn’t it?” Mimi agreed. “The streets seem ordinary enough, but there’s something about the atmosphere...”

Quiet...wasn’t exactly the word. It was laid-back, almost lazy, though the people seemed lively enough. The place just lacked the bustle I’d seen in other

colonies.

“Elves of the Leafil System are usually easygoing,” Elma explained. “We have long lives by your standards, so most of us aren’t in as much of a rush as humans.”

“Is that what it is?” Mimi asked.

“Could be,” I joked. “Elma does nothing but laze around on her days off.”

Mimi and I liked to be on the move. Even in my downtime, I exercised, maintained my weapons, browsed digital catalogs for gadgets that might give us the edge in battle, and planned plenty of activities with whichever crew members happened to be free. Mimi was always busy doing research and studying ops. Elma, on the other hand, spent her free time drinking and sleeping. She worked out a little, too, but she loved to relax.

Elma sniffed. “Don’t be rude. I like to keep a clear boundary between work and leisure. From my perspective, you two are always running around making a fuss.”

We argued back and forth while we checked out a promising store.

“Is it me,” I said, “or is this place crazy expensive?”

“Leafil System prices do seem awfully high compared to other colonies.”

The shop sold a mix of planet-sourced specialty goods, souvenirs, and imports from other star systems. Things like that were overpriced everywhere, but these were even more expensive than I’d expected. Up to twice as expensive, in fact, going by my experiences haggling in other systems.

A sales clerk interrupted us. “Everyone from other colonies says that,” she smiled. “Leafil IV—we call it Theta, by the way—exports very little. The elvish population is small, and Theta is blessed with enough natural bounty to support us, so we have little need for industry or trade.”

“But you’re part of the Grakkan Empire, aren’t you?” I said. “Haven’t you been pressured to industrialize?”

“Of course. The Leafil System joined the Grakkan Empire during my grandfather’s time, back when His Majesty the Emperor personally led the

expansion of the Empire.”

“Personally led the expansion?” Mimi’s eyes widened. “Are you talking about the first Emperor?”

“That’s right. We elves didn’t fight the invaders from the sky; we submitted peacefully, and in return we were granted autonomy over our home system. The first Emperor was so moved by the beauty of Theta that he agreed to allow it to remain untouched. Since that time, our mother planet has been a natural conservation world. Elven culture in this system hasn’t changed much since those days.”

Is imperialism usually that touchy-feely? That question bothered me, but the clerk was probably giving us the short version of the story for tourists, leaving out whatever complications had no doubt arisen along the way.

“One of my great-grandfathers was among the elves who went to the stars as a vassal to the first Emperor,” she added. She turned to Elma. “You’re of that lineage too, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. My grandfather was a vassal.”

“What you’re saying is,” I ventured, “there are two elven bloodlines. One stayed in the home system and kept up their old traditions, and the other went out into space.”

“More or less,” said Elma. “But it isn’t as if we’re at odds with one another. We just have different lifestyles and ways of thinking.”

The clerk nodded eagerly. “I don’t have anything against the people who went to the stars, but sometimes it feels like they look down on us. To us, it seems like they left Theta and the blessings of the spirits behind, while they think home-worlders are old-fashioned geezers who cling to outdated traditions. But our differences seldom escalate to open insults.” She punctuated all this with a smile.

“You’re *sure* you’re not at odds with each other?” I said.

“Not very convincing, huh?” Elma laughed.

The clerk laughed too. “We play it up a little for the humans. Go on—now that

I've opened my heart and revealed the secrets of the elves, you'd better buy something. Even if it's a little pricey."

She was a smooth saleswoman, all right. But she'd told a good story, and I had enough money that these prices were nothing to me. I decided to let her swindle me.

We left the elf woman's shop with more souvenirs than we strictly needed. As we headed out, I got a call on my handheld information terminal. I glanced at the screen; it was Mei, back on the *Black Lotus*. I accepted the call, hoping everything was all right, and set it to speaker mode so Mimi and Elma could listen in.

"Hey. What's up?"

"I am contacting you to inform you that Tinia of the Grald Clan is requesting a meeting with you."

"Tinia of the Grald Clan? Doesn't ring a bell. Is she important or something?"

"She is one of the hostages you rescued from the pirate ship, Master. She would like to meet with you and thank you in person. She came directly to the *Black Lotus*. I escorted her to our lounge so as not to offend."

"I guess it'd be rude to kick her out on the street, huh? Is she from one of those rich clans?"

"Correct. The Grald Clan is one of the most powerful clans on Leafil IV, and Miss Tinia is their chieftain's eldest daughter."

"Oh." So trouble had come to our door. Was she the plucky beauty who'd spoken up to me on the pirate ship? I was willing to bet she was. I still wasn't clear on how important these clan chieftains were, but if she was a VIP's daughter, her combination of poise and guts made sense.

Elma and Mimi looked resigned to the news of further complications—no, they looked as above-it-all as a pair of Buddha statues. They weren't about to leave me to deal with this alone, were they? What happened to our battle-won bonds? *Don't give me those pitying looks, I thought. We share the same fate.*

We'll suffer together!

Aloud, I said, "Well...um...I can't exactly turn her down, can I?"

"It isn't impossible," Mei replied, "but to refuse such a meeting without good cause would be taken as an insult to the clan. Furthermore, a positive relationship with the Grald Clan can only work in your favor during our stay on Leafil IV."

"In other words, I've gotta talk to this girl. We'll head straight back, but it may take us a while to reach the ship. Why don't you ask her to come back for dinner? That way, she can meet the entire crew. If she agrees, I'll leave you to handle the arrangements. Make it clear that it's my treat."

"Understood. I will pass your message along and call back as soon as I have a response."

"Thanks." I hung up.

I'd had a feeling I wouldn't get much time to relax, but the vacation had been cut short sooner than I expected. Oh, well. I'd just have to be careful and avoid letting a simple dinner meeting turn into something more complicated.

In the end, given the choice between sitting around indefinitely or coming back for a lighthearted dinner party, Tinia of the Grald Clan went for the second option and cleared out until evening. Mei found a restaurant on Leafil IV—Theta to the natives—where we could sample high-end local cuisine.

"Traditional elven food!" Mimi piped up. "I can't wait!"

"Don't expect anything too unusual," said Elma. "I don't recall eating giant caterpillars on my last trip here."

"That's a relief," I said, laughing a little nervously.

Kormat III's specialty, whole-roasted giant caterpillars, had made an impression on all of us. That said, they turned out to be damn tasty caterpillars.

Back at the *Black Lotus*, Mei debriefed us on Tinia's visit and what to expect at dinner that evening.

“Sorry to work you so hard,” I told her.

“It was nothing. Miss Tinia was perfectly agreeable.”

“What was she like?”

“I found her intelligent and tenacious.” Mei turned on the holo-display. An elven woman with chestnut hair falling to her waist appeared. I recognized those fierce eyes; as I’d suspected, she was the girl who’d spoken to me on the pirate ship.

“So it *is* her,” I muttered.

“Do you know her?” Elma asked.

“She took it on herself to speak for the hostages. Now that I think back, she even introduced herself.”

“I see,” said Mimi. “She’s very pretty...”

“Heck yeah, she’s hot!” Tina agreed.

“Very attractive, for sure,” said Wiska. “Not that I’m surprised.” I noticed some thorniness in her remark. As much as I wanted to butt in and explain that I hadn’t exactly been hitting on the hostages, I knew it’d just open me up to more teasing.

“Instead of pickin’ up new gals,” said Tina, “you oughta stick around here and pay more attention to *me*.”

Wiska blushed. Both mechanics gave me the once-over.

I made a show of focusing on my terminal. “Before dinner, I’d better go over the files I got from the mercenary guild.”

“C’mon, hon! Check me out instead!”

“Tina!” cried Wiska.

“Give me some time to steel my resolve.” It wasn’t that I didn’t like Tina and Wiska. They were cute, and they were great to work with. I also knew that, age-wise, they were as mature as I was. I just wasn’t into them that way. They looked way too young! Any speculation in that direction felt criminal, and not in a good way. Besides, I was kind of a boob guy...

“Ah, whatever,” Tina shrugged. “One of these days I’ll make you fall head over heels for me, hon.”

“Good luck with that,” I muttered.

“What was that, laughin’ boy? Wanna get punched into next week?”

“Sorry! Have mercy!”

If Tina punched me as hard as she could, she could easily break my non-augmented bones. I didn’t want to ruin our affable relationship. Some would say a man should take anything that’s offered, but...come on.

Elma backed me up. “That’s enough for today, girls.”

Tina groaned. “Okay, okay. Out of deference to my sister-in-law, I’ll leave him alone for now.”

“Sorry.”

Frankly, between Mimi, Elma, and Mei, I was already at maximum capacity. I’d need to be a bigger man, in more ways than one, to bring anyone else into the fold.

“Yeah, so anyway...let’s take a look at the pirate case.” With my handheld terminal, I displayed an image of the pirate ship. Information unscrolled over it.

“Not much of interest,” said Elma.

“Yeah, looks like your standard drop raid turned abduction.”

The background was basically what Elma and I had assumed. Several pirate ships had attacked Leafil IV, using their firepower and maneuverability to overwhelm the planet’s defenses. An elven ceremony was attacked, and several dozen people—mostly young women—were kidnapped.

The ten elves I’d rescued from the flagship were the highest-ranking of those captives, and thus the most valuable hostages. Everyone else had been killed during the pirates’ battles with the star system army and the Imperial Fleet.

The authorities were in for a lot of bad publicity for botching the rescue operation so badly. Not only had they failed to rescue any hostages, they’d allowed the pirate flagship to escape, leaving a mercenary ship that happened

to be passing by—that would be us—to clean up after them. We’d taken down the ship and even freed the surviving captives. The military had been caught with its pants down. Still, judging from the warm welcome I got from the general, the brass didn’t hold a grudge. I shrugged it off.

“The ceremony the pirates crashed,” I said, reading on, “was the wedding of the Grald chieftain’s daughter and the Minpha chieftain’s son. In other words, Tinia and that wounded guy.”

“Political marriages of that type are common to strengthen the bonds between clans,” said Elma.

“Attacking a wedding...” Mimi shook her head. “Tragedy aside, does this make it a political affair?”

“Yeah,” I said. “The attack itself is typical piracy, but the pirates happened to snag a couple of serious VIPs.”

“It may not have been chance.” Elma’s eyes narrowed. “It’s possible someone wanted to stop the alliance between the Grald and Minpha clans and leaked information to the pirates.”

If we suspected the pirates might have had help crashing the party, the clans were sure to have thought of the same thing. Those two clans were definitely going to be wary of the other clans going forward, perhaps even to the point of hostility.

“Our timing’s as perfect as ever, huh?” I sighed. “I almost want to cancel our plans and find a vacation spot in a quieter corner of the universe.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Tina. “Heck, you ain’t never been to the dwarven mother system.”

“The Galakis System!” Wiska added. “It’s seven hyperlane stops away from here.”

“Why not?” said Elma. “Dealing with Kormat System politics has been exhausting.”

“Hmm... Should we, though?” Only Mimi spoke up against my idea. Knowing her, she’d be reluctant to leave until she’d tied up this case.

As for Mei...she usually supported my decisions unless I was way off-base, but she didn't usually offer much input.

"For now," I said, "let's keep an eye on the situation and be ready to get out of here if we need to. We've already put in our landing request. It wouldn't hurt to poke around a little."

The entire crew assented to this. Having reached a consensus on our immediate plans, the next order of business was the dinner party. What kind of things would Tinia want to discuss? We'd have to do our best not to say anything that could get us tangled up in Leafil IV's power struggles.

After dressing for a classy dinner, we followed Mei's directions to the restaurant she'd booked. She warned me that there'd been some debate over who would pay. I was used to arguments where each person tried to get the other to foot the bill, but this was the opposite situation. Mei, following my instructions, had offered to pay because we were making the invitation, while Tinia argued that she ought to repay us for saving her. In the end, Mei won the battle, though Tinia had insisted we could ask for extra remuneration from the army if the bill ended up being too high.

"Sounds like Tinia doesn't bend easily," I said to Mei.

"Is that your conclusion? You may be right, Master. She struck me as someone who values logical arguments."

"Nothing wrong with that," I said. "Probably means she deals fair and square."

"Or she's just hard-headed," Tina said bluntly.

"Sis..." Wiska groaned. Exchanges like these were common between the twins. "You can talk like that in front of us, but at the restaurant you'd better be on your best behavior."

Tina laughed uproariously. "Don't you worry none!"

"Wiska's right," I said. "Screw this up for us, and I'll see to it you never drink again."

“I’ll be real careful.” Just as I’d expected, Tina straightened up right away. Even Wiska went pale. I tried not to laugh out loud.

The casual banter continued as we made our way to the restaurant. Mimi, however, stayed silent, a slight frown on her face.

“Is something on your mind?” I asked. “You look tense.”

“I was just wondering what kind of trouble we’ll get dragged into this time. If I can think one or two steps ahead, maybe I can avoid it.”

“Wow. I like the way you think, but how’s that working out for you?”

“Not well at all. I have no idea what we should brace ourselves for.”

I wasn’t able to see the future either, but it wasn’t hard to guess at least a little. Not to brag, but Tina would probably take a liking to me, or else to someone in my crew. As her rescuers, we’d get the royal treatment from her clan, but that would only drag us into the local power struggle... You get the picture.

I’d have preferred to dodge that bullet, but the only way to do that for certain was to get the hell off Leafil IV. That was why I’d suggested canceling our plans and high-tailing it for the next galaxy.

“Let it go,” I said. “Best case scenario, we find an opportunity to make a little extra money. Worst case, we run for it.”

“You say that,” said Elma, who had been listening in, “but would you really run from a fight?”

“You never can bring yourself to cut your losses,” Mimi agreed.

“That’s not true!” I said.

“Isn’t it?” Elma gave me one of her knowing looks. Like she knew what she was talking about. I’d said it plenty of times, and, okay, maybe I’d never actually done it, but I could totally run if need be. Sometimes, real bravery was walking away from something you knew you couldn’t handle.

“We’re almost there,” said Mei.

“Finally! I was starting to think we were walking in circles.”

“Maybe we should get an RV for jaunts like this.”

Just the other day, we’d had the educational experience of landing on a planet mid-terraform. It wasn’t an experience I ever wanted to repeat, but if it happened once, it could happen again. It might be worth getting a land vehicle for emergencies like that. And there was the time we’d had to drive aggressive life-forms away from a colony...

“Ooh, an RV?” Tina cracked her knuckles. “I’d love to get under the hood of one of those.”

“You do enjoy messing around with engines and chassis, Sis.”

Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea after all. Tina would want to put a huge muffler on it to make the engine sound like a bomb going off. Or cover it in dumb biker slogans, or bolt spikes to it...

“This looks like the place,” said Elma. “Let’s go in.”

“Finally! Elven cuisine!”

“Hell yeah,” I agreed.

From the outside, the restaurant was nondescript, almost like an office building. But what lay inside?

“Welcome to our establishment.” We were greeted by a server draped in clothing with an arabesque pattern, presumably some kind of traditional elven garb. “Your companion has already arrived.”

“Thanks. Mind showing us to her?”

“Right this way.” The server led us to the back. In contrast to the bland exterior, the wood-paneled rooms inside the restaurant were adorned with carvings that reminded me of Asian art back on Earth. The wooden pillars and support beams, bathed in warm indirect lighting, were oddly reassuring.

“What an interesting style...”

“This is classic elven décor.”

“Ooh, I kinda like it.”

“Yeah. It’s so soothing.”

All the girls sounded impressed. Lumber was a luxury material in the Empire, and the restaurant was showing off its wealth by displaying so much. The thought made me even more excited to sample the food.

“Please remove your shoes before proceeding,” said the server as we reached a wood-floored hallway.

“Wow, you take your shoes off here?” Mimi asked.

“Seems like it,” I said. This place was really starting to take me back to Japan.

“How unusual,” said Tina.

Wiska agreed. “Isn’t it!”

The girls went along with the request, but it was clear they saw it as strange. I’d never seen anyone do it in this universe, either. Only Elma seemed unsurprised, so she must have expected it.

“Pardon me. Your room.” The server opened a sliding door similar to a Japanese shoji door. We entered a small dining room. Inside sat three elves, all women. I recognized one as Tinia of the Grald Clan.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said.

Tinia shook her head. She seemed to be in charge here. “It’s perfectly fine. We arrived early.” That strong-willed gaze I remembered focused on me. “Please have a seat—I’m sorry if you’re not used to sitting on the floor.”

“It’s fine. We can sit wherever we want, right?” I opted to seat myself directly across from Tinia. I figured I ought to make it easy for the two of us to talk face to face. Mimi and Elma sat on either side of me, while Tina and Wiska sat next to Mimi. Mei knelt politely on a cushion behind us. Tinia glanced quizzically at Mei.

“She’s a Maidroid,” I explained. “She doesn’t eat.”

“Maidroid?”

“Oh, maybe they haven’t been introduced in this system. She’s an android—she’s mechanical, so she doesn’t need food.”

“I had no idea such a race existed.” Tinia and her companions clearly had no idea what an android was, but my incomplete explanation satisfied them for the time being.

“How about we all introduce ourselves before we eat?” I suggested. “I’m Hiro, captain and owner of the combat ship *Krishna* and the armed mothership *Black Lotus*. I’m a guild mercenary, platinum rank. This is Mimi, operator-slash-manager of the *Krishna*. And this is Elma, the *Krishna*’s sub-pilot. She’s also a mercenary with the guild.”

“Nice to meet you all,” said Elma.

“It’s a pleasure,” said Mimi.

“Those two are Tina and Wiska. Tina’s the redhead; Wiska’s the one with the blue hair. They’re top-tier engineers on loan from Space Dwergr.”

Tina smiled and waved. “Good to meetcha.”

“Charmed.” Wiska bowed her head earnestly. They might look almost alike, but it was impossible to mistake the twins for one another.

“And the lady behind me is Mei. She operates and maintains the *Black Lotus*, and she commanded the battle bots during our raid on the pirates.”

Mei bowed toward the cushion. She and the elves all sat on their knees, just like people did back in Japan. I was sitting cross-legged, and Tina sat the same way, but Mimi and Wiska were both struggling to copy Elma’s kneeling position. *Just do whatever’s comfortable. It’s not like you’re wearing skirts.*

“Thank you for the introductions,” Tinia said. “Now allow me. I am Tinia, first daughter of the Grald Clan chieftain. This is Miza, and this is Mam. Both are, like myself, members of the Grald Clan. Consider them my personal attendants.”

“Attendants, eh?” She really was some kind of nobility. “Uh...is there a title I should call you by?”

“None, please. Tinia will be fine. It would be discourteous to expect deference from one to whom I owe so much.”

“It’s not deference, it’s just... Aw, never mind. Whatever floats your boat. If you’ve got an entourage, you must be a pretty big deal, right?”

Tinia brushed off the suggestion. “While my family is considered high-status here on Theta—Leafil IV—we have little authority elsewhere. Off-planet, I’m just another girl. Think nothing of such matters, Sir Hiro. Besides, though Miza and Mam are my attendants, our relationship is far from formal. They’ve been my dearest friends since childhood.”

Those “dear friends” looked awfully tense to me... Were they wary around my mercenary band, or nervous about pleasing their mistress? “Well, that’s enough introductions. We can talk more after the food shows up.”

“Yes, let us do just that.” Tinia loosened up a little and even flashed a smile.

Man, she’s even hotter when her face lights up... Hey! Ow! Stop pinching me from the sides! I’m not gawking!

The elven meal wasn’t split into courses. All the food was brought to the table at once, and we were encouraged to dig in. My crew burst into admiring coos.

“How gorgeous! It’s a treat just to look at!”

“A real feast for the eyes, huh?”

Arrayed before me were what looked like wild vegetable tempura, steak from some unknown beast, and a number of simmering pots. The ingredients were varied and colorful. Like Mimi had said, it was fun just to watch the food being arranged before us. To me, it looked like the kind of spread you’d expect at a four-star hotel.

“These dishes are considered luxurious even on Theta,” Tinia confided. “This the type of gourmet cuisine we serve to impress guests.”

“I could’ve guessed that. It must take a team of dedicated chefs to put all this together.”

We’d been served two kinds of fried foods, grilled and stewed dishes, soups, some small potted casseroles, pickled vegetables, and even some sweets. The vegetables in the stews were cut into decorative shapes, and each dish was presented to show off dazzling colors. This wasn’t just food; it was art.

Tinia cocked her head. “For a spacefarer, you seem to be quite the gourmet.”

Living on a planet, Tinia was probably used to eating real food, but most people in space had never eaten anything but synthetic food cartridges. They usually had next to no experience with cooking or seasonings, so of course she was surprised that I wasn't totally ignorant.

"Hiro knows how to make meals out of raw ingredients," Elma bragged.

"That's right!" said Mimi. "He's a pretty good cook."

"How fascinating. I've studied cooking myself, though only the basics. If the opportunity ever arises, it would be lovely to try one another's cooking." Tinia gifted me with another stunning smile.

"Hey, I'm just a spacer whipping things up for his crew. Don't expect anything *this* fancy from me."

"You're too modest. It's rare for someone to know at a glance that a table was prepared by artisan chefs."

Even Tina and Wiska joined in piling on the compliments.

"Yeah! Good eye, hon!"

"You're quite perceptive."

Were they trying to kill me with kindness? If any of them thought they'd get something out of me, they were on the wrong track.

"I notice your crew is all-female," Tinia said.

"It just kinda happened that way. I was on my own at first, but then Mimi came on board, and Elma joined up not long after. Then we got Mei, and the company I bought the mothership from sent Tina and Wiska to do maintenance."

"I see." Tinia's gaze settled on Mimi next. "If you don't mind, may I ask how you ended up on Sir Hiro's ship? I'm quite curious."

Mimi looked at me hesitantly. I shrugged. "I don't mind. Go for it, Mimi."

"Well...in that case..."

Mimi launched into a description of her past. Then Elma shared how she'd ended up on the ship, too. Over the course of the dinner, everyone on my crew

wound up talking about themselves. It must have been rare to hear tales of off-planet life, because Tinia and her attendants were on the edge of their seats.

At last there was a lull in the conversation. “I apologize for asking for so many of your stories,” said Tinia, “without offering any of ours in return.”

“Hey, no problem. Nothing beats an attentive audience, right, girls?”

“That’s right,” said Elma. “Hiro’s the one who ought to apologize, for butting in with all those stupid comments.”

“Hey, back off. It’s called adding relevant information.”

Tinia watched our playful bickering with interest. “Have you two exchanged marriage vows?”

That shut us up. “What do you mean by ‘marriage vows,’ exactly?” I asked. Sure, we had a physical relationship, but I wasn’t ready to get into intimate detail in mixed company.

“We’re not married,” said Elma. “But we have a relationship that my family has formally accepted. In terms of elven tradition, you could say we’re betrothed.”

“I see... What about Miss Mimi?”

“Um...we, er...” Mimi’s eyes wandered as her cheeks flushed.

Mei spoke up. “Miss Mimi and my Master are legally wed under Imperial Citizen Law.”

“But he’s engaged to Miss Elma?” Tinia’s eyes narrowed. Elves were monogamous. I came from a society with similar views, so I wasn’t surprised by her skepticism.

“You could say we have a polyamorous marriage,” Elma explained. “Hiro has an honorary non-hereditary title with the Empire, and that grants him the right to multiple marriages. He can certainly afford to support more than one spouse.”

“Is that how people live in the outer worlds? I must say I find it bewildering.”

“That’s nothin’! He’s plannin’ to get it on with me and Wis too sooner or

later!”

“Sis!”

Tinia took the twin’s jokes seriously. “Ah, well. I suppose mercenaries work hard and play hard, as they say.”

I didn’t much like Tinia’s assumption that I’d hop into bed with anyone on my crew. But considering that I was sleeping with three of them, I couldn’t exactly claim to be pure as the driven snow.

I tried to play it cool. “There’s nothing...well, not *nothing* between us, but we haven’t gotten up to anything like that yet.”

“Yet?”

“Hey, you never know what the future could hold. But I’m not a rutting animal, okay?”

“Interesting.” Tinia nodded in apparent understanding. I’d expected her to be more of a prude, but she already seemed to be overcoming her shock. It was a little suspicious, actually. *She’s not into it, is she? Because as much as I’d like to oblige, I’m reaching my limit here.*

“It’ll be like joining a big ol’ family,” Tina was saying. “I always wanted one of those.”

“When you put it that way, family ties *are* nice.”

“You two think it’s a done deal, don’t you?”

“Aw, hon, don’t just use us an’ toss us aside!”

“After we’ve shown you so much love...”

The twins worked up two sets of crocodile tears. Miza and Mam glared daggers at me. “Give me a break, you two! You’re heartless!” *This isn’t what it looks like! I’m a somewhat innocent man!*

“Can you stop teasing me already?”

At long last, the crew gave into my begging and stopped ganging up on me about my love life. Fortunately, Tinia seemed to understand we were just

fooling around. I hoped she took it as a sign of how well we all worked together.

Of course, Tinia didn't know I was involved with Mei, too. And I was starting to suspect that Tina and Wiska weren't entirely joking. But whatever. For the moment, it was best to let Mei have her privacy and remind the twins that we were just friends. I had to keep the peace among my crew, after all. But damn if I wasn't down to my last nerve.

"Why don't we change the subject?" Tinia suggested.

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"I'd like to know more about you three," said Mimi. "What's it like, living on a planet?"

"What's it like? Hm..." Tina cocked her head in thought. "The Grald Clan is a clan of hunters. We wake each morning at dawn. The women bathe and gather water while the men collect firewood. When the women are finished, it's the men's turn to bathe."

"And after morning chores, the hunting begins?" I asked.

"Indeed. The men hunt dingils, mumbas, lesarias, pirurs, and kinjas."

"It's hard to picture them from the names alone," said Mimi. I couldn't even begin to imagine what kinds of animals they might be.

"Oh, dingils are ferocious beasts. Some are even man-eaters. Mumbas are timid but can be surprisingly dangerous when cornered. Lesarias are large, aggressive reptiles with tough skin. Pirurs and kinjas are birds."

"Sounds like a lot of dangerous animals," I said.

"They're nothing compared to those white monsters or Twisteds you've faced," said Elma. "They're just wild animals. They know how to defend themselves, but when they're not being hunted, they mostly leave people alone."

Tinia's long ears pricked up. "Are you a hunter yourself, Sir Hiro?"

"What I've fought are more like biological weapons. They're creatures engineered to fight...well, basically any living thing besides themselves and their masters."

“Beasts bred only for slaughter?”

“More or less,” said Elma. “Out in space, there are life forms that are more like monsters than what you’d call animals. And there are monstrous people who create and toy with them, playing God.”

“That sounds terrifying.” Tinia swished her hand through the air, like someone on Earth crossing themselves or warding off the evil eye. “You’ve fought such creatures and lived to tell the tale?”

“Yeah, but not in, like, hand-to-hand combat. When I took on the white monsters, I wore power armor.”

“You fought Twisted without power armor, and they’re more dangerous,” Elma reminded me.

“Look, I didn’t ask to be thrown into that hellhole.” This time, I wasn’t just brushing off compliments. I never wanted to be trapped in the living nightmare of a mid-terraforming environment again. I reminded myself to go shopping for some lightweight power armor as soon as we got back to a high-tech system, just in case.

Tina had been listening intently. Hoisting an ale-filled mug, she asked Tinia, “Hey, what kinda weapons do you use to hunt? Lasers would scorch the meat, huh?” Of course that was what would pique a tech-loving dwarf’s interest.

“We seldom use the weapons of the outer worlds to hunt. Hunters carry spirit silver bows and arrows, spears, and hunting knives.”

“Spirit silver?” I raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar term. Tina’s and Wiska’s eyes sparkled as they leaned in, eager to learn about a new material.

“Yes. Most metals are incompatible with the spiritual arts, but spirit silver works harmoniously with them.”

“Spiritual arts? You mean magic?”

I knew Elma could use magic. She’d demonstrated it to me before, though all she’d been able to do was spark a flame just big enough to use as a lighter. According to her, magical aura was thin in space, so it was basically impossible to perform serious spells.

“Hey, that’s right,” said Tina. “I’ve heard elves have some kinda psionic aptitude. Is spirit silver one of them PAMs?”

“PAMs?”

“Psionic Amplification Materials. It’s a real mouthful, so everyone just calls ‘em PAMs. Basically, we’re talkin’ substances that amplify the mind.”

“Are you serious?”

“Sure. Most of ‘em have metallic properties, but they’re real rare ‘cause they’re so tough to forge. If you try to handle a PAM like an ordinary metal, you’ll shatter it.”

“And they don’t have many applications beyond amplifying psionic abilities,” added Wiska, “so they’re not very valuable to non-psychic races. For materials that are so difficult to produce, they’re not especially strong or heat-resistant. There are hobbyists who collect them for their novelty, though.”

“But the people of Theta use them to hunt.” I turned to Tinia. “Do you, like, ask wind spirits to make your arrows fly faster? Or ask earth spirits to make your spears stronger and sharper?”

Tinia looked surprised. “Why, yes. How do you know of such things, Sir Hiro? ...Oh, Miss Elma must have told you.”

“Something like that,” Elma replied. She elbowed me in the side, hard enough to leave a bruise.

She hadn’t told me anything like that, but I had a lot of odd knowledge by this universe’s standards. I didn’t want to reveal my strange background—that I’d woken up in the *Krishna* out of nowhere—so Elma was vigilant about offhand remarks that might give me away. I couldn’t say she was wrong to be worried, but I wished her elbows were a little less sharp.

I hurried to change the subject. “What do you do with the game you bring down?”

“First, we drain the blood and cool the carcass in water. After that, the hunting party takes it to the village. The skins and furs are tanned, and every cut of meat is prepared for cooking. Though this restaurant doesn’t serve them, we

have many fine recipes for sweetbreads and organs.”

“Organs?” Mimi paled. Back on Earth I’d eaten liver once or twice, but organ meats probably sounded squicky to people who had never tried them.

“Naturally. Offal doesn’t stay fresh for long, so it’s harder to sell than other meat, but internal organs have nutrients and flavor that muscle meat lacks. We believe in using everything nature gives us, wasting nothing.”

“I may not chow down on intestines on a regular basis,” I said, “but I can appreciate your lifestyle.”

“It makes you a little ashamed of how we live, doesn’t it?” Elma said, half-joking.

“No doubt about that.” The Thetan elves revered nature, accepted whatever they had with gratitude, and let nothing go to waste. It was a far cry from our high-flying mercenary lifestyle. We were hunters, too, but we didn’t live off our prey’s flesh and blood. Or...maybe, in a way, we did.

“We have our ways, and you have yours,” Tinia said. “As long as we respect one another, I see no problem with our differences.”

“Back where I come from, we had a saying: when in Rome, do as the Romans do. While we’re guests here, we ought to follow your ways. I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“Agreed!” said Mimi. “And, um, I would be interested in trying the offal...”

“I wanna drink more of this elven booze!” said Tina.

“Me, too,” said Wiska. “All of the drinks here have been delicious.”

My crew’s obsession with food and drink was starting to get embarrassing. Oh, well—we were tourists, at least for the moment. And I wasn’t one to talk, given that I’d come to this planet in search of soda. We were all peas in a pod.

The dinner party carried on without incident. Even after we ran out of food, we had plenty to talk about. Tina and Wiska drank the whole time, without slowing down once. Where did they fit all that alcohol in those tiny bodies? Truly, dwarves were mysterious beings.

The next day, we received a formal missive from Nekt of the Minpha Clan. He thanked us for saving his life and freeing him from the pirates, and added that he would have thanked us in person if he wasn't still healing up. He said if we visited the Minpha Clan on Theta with his letter in hand, we would be treated as honored guests of the son of a chieftain.

"Take a look at this!" I waved the missive in front of Mimi and Elma. "A letter! In an envelope! Who the hell writes letters in this day and age? This is the wildest thing that's happened yet."

"And on paper," said Mimi. "He must really be trying to impress us."

Elma agreed. "Paper is beyond a luxury. It's among the most precious of commodities."

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that in this universe, everything had gone electronic. Writing on paper was almost unheard of. Thinking back, in fact, I couldn't recall seeing anyone use paper at all since I'd come here, even simple note paper. Almost all packaging was plastic, with labels printed directly on the package.

"Look how swanky it is," said Tina, stroking the paper.

"The message is elegant," said Wiska, "but not as elegant as the paper."

"I wonder what kind of person Nekt is," I mused. "I've only seen him wounded and half-conscious." At dinner, Tinia had made the same offer as Nekt, inviting us to visit Grald Clan territory when we made it to Theta, and promising we'd be welcomed with open arms. "I don't want anything too stuffy or formal, but I wouldn't mind having someone to show us around town."

We'd come to the Leafil System for sightseeing, and my personal goal was to search for soda. I'd been asking around about elven medicinal drinks, hoping to find something comparable to the carbonated drinks of my world. At this point, I was willing to go to ridiculous lengths for soda. I'd resort to violence if necessary. I could no longer fool myself into thinking crappy substitutes were enough.

"Let's not get caught up in any power struggles, though," I added, as much to myself as to the crew. "Be ready to pack up and leave if necessary. It's just one

little planet. Once we're out of the system, they won't be able to hold us."

"All this attention does have me a little worried," Mimi said.

The twins nodded. "You attract trouble like flies to honey, hon."

"Sometimes it feels like, no matter what we do, there's no way to keep you out of it."

"Have mercy, Wiska," I begged. A comment like that had a way of turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now that she'd said it out loud, I started to think I was wasting my time planning escape routes. *Knock it off*, I told myself. *Being human means never giving up. We don't accept the fate we're given; we carve out our own destiny.* I think somebody in a manga said that. Or maybe it was a video game. Or an anime. Whatever.

This pointless conversation was interrupted by Mei's voice filling the lounge. "Master." She appeared on the holo-display, seated in the *Black Lotus* cockpit.

"What's up, Mei?"



“The Leafil IV Planetary Administration Bureau has accepted our landing request. Once we inform them of our schedule, we may land.”

“Really? That was fast. I thought you said it’d take a while.”

“It seems the Chieftains’ Alliance—the Grald and Minpha Clans, primarily—expedited our request.”

“I see.”

“I thought that might happen,” Elma said quietly.

I didn’t know all the details of Leafil IV’s power structure, but the star system army and the Chieftains’ Alliance both owed us, big-time, and they seemed to wield a lot of local power. It made sense that they could lean on the planetary bureaucracy to speed things up for us.

“It’s cool and all that they’re ready for us,” I said, “but the pirate ship we captured is still a wreck. We can’t drop repairs and start our vacation tomorrow.”

“Darn right,” Tina piped up. “We’ll need another three...nah, two days.”

“But I can get ready to put it up for sale as soon as it’s refurbished,” said Mimi. “After all, we already know the specs. We can proceed with the sale and take offers while we’re on Leafil IV. No need to rush things on that front.”

Wiska chimed in. “Tina and I can finish the repairs after we’ve landed and settled a few accounts. But that would mean leaving it in dock for several days, racking up docking fees. Even if we finish the repairs before we land, we’ll still have to dock it until it sells, so it’s best not to let the sale drag on too long.”

“Then let’s plan to land in three days,” I decided. “Sorry to put pressure on you, Tina and Wiska, but it’d be a huge help if you could get the repairs done in the next couple of days. Mimi, start work on the sale. Tina and Wiska can give you any info on the ship you need.”

“Okay!”

“Roger, boss.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll adjust the landing schedule,” said Elma. “I need to let the planet know our trajectory anyway.”

“Good, do that. When the time comes, we’ll land in the *Black Lotus*, so I’m sure we’ll need a full docking facility. Work with Mei to plan that.”

“Aye-aye.”

“Yes, Master.”

As everyone else hurried to their stations, I realized I’d shoved all the work onto my crew. “Wait. What do I do?”

“Don’t worry,” said Elma. “We’ll let you know. But don’t wander about too much, okay? We don’t want you picking up any more weird trouble.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

See? I was totally a good boy.

“Hum dee dum dee dum...”

I really did try to be good. Knowing Elma, she was afraid I’d wander around the colony and run into Tinia, Nekt, or some other big-shot elf who’d drag me into their drama, so I stayed on board the ship. Very safe. Very sensible.

But that didn’t mean the *ship* couldn’t step out a little, right? Was there any harm in a quick jaunt in the *Krishna* to hunt pirates?

Of course there wasn’t. Kill time, kill pirates, make a little money, make everything safer for the good people of the Leafil System. There weren’t any big-shot elves in space. There wasn’t any drama. Just pirates and violence. Elma couldn’t object to that.

Armed with this genius theory, I climbed into the *Krishna*’s cockpit. Elma spun around in her seat to greet me. “Good morning. You’re up early.”

“Uh. Hey.” I did a quick one-eighty. “Just remembered I have urgent business.”

So long, Elma. You didn’t see anything. You didn’t catch me up to any funny business. I’m a good boy, an obedient boy, and you’ll find me sitting nice and

quiet in the Black Lotus lounge. Good boy...

No! I'm a good boy! Let me go! Ow, my shoulder! Elma, your grip is too strong! Please!

"What a terrible dream," I said, rubbing my aching shoulder.

Tina and Wiska, who'd come back to the lounge for a break, stared at me in disbelief.

"Captain, we really don't have time for games right now..."

"That was no dream! Elma got you good, and now she's got you under surveillance!"

I glanced around to see Mei standing behind me. *What, her? She's just my bodyguard.*

"This ain't like you, hon. What's gotten into you, stirrin' up trouble?"

"The power of space compels me..."

"You're just bored and looking for fun."

"Who, me? How can you say that?"

The thing was, flying around shooting at pirates and space monsters and stuff was a lot easier for me than untangling political problems. I had the crazy hope that going out into space would tilt my luck back to my favor. If I was a magnet for trouble, at least I could attract the kind of trouble I liked.

What's that? You don't think I could magically jinx myself into a better situation? Well, listen here. Ever since I came to this universe, trouble had been finding me. I'm not talking once or twice; I couldn't go anywhere without running into it. And Mimi and Elma had been with me long enough to know the score.

"Just relax, hon. I'm sure you'll find tons of fun after we land."

"You think so too, Tina?"

"Sure as sugar I do. Ever since we left the Vlad System, it's been crystal entities here, imperial nuisances there, noble power struggles all over the dang place..."

“I know you enjoy getting to show off, but c’mon...”

The dwarves gave me twin pitying looks. I winced. Hey, none of that was my fault! Not much of it, anyway! Besides, as long as they stuck with me, we were all in the same boat. *Help me out, girls! Don’t think you’re safe from my weird luck!*

I spent the rest of the day helping Tina and Wiska, being a very good boy indeed, under Mei’s constant surveillance.

Since I do value my own life, I stayed put on the *Black Lotus* for two days straight. Why was someone from the crew constantly by my side? Did they think I’d get up to some kind of mischief if I was unsupervised? Did they not trust me as an adult? Did they think if they took their eyes off me, I’d do something stupid?

They did? Well...fair enough.

Good thing I enjoyed the attention.

“It’s been a while since we had some quiet time together,” said Mimi.

“Yeah, things have been hectic lately.”

It was my second night of captivity. We’d finished dinner in the dining hall and were hanging out at the table. The twins, still in their mechanics’ jumpsuits and worn out from a long day of repairs, were digging into their meals.

“No kiddin’,” said Tina around a mouthful of food. “We *still* ain’t had any downtime.”

“But we’ve seen the job through to the end,” Wiska reminded her.

Their workload over the past two days had been heavier than anyone’s. That had left me with plenty of time to kick back with one or all three of my girls.

“You can look forward to a hefty bonus for all that work,” I told them.

“The money’s nice and all, hon, but we wanna have a little fun too!”

“If you really want to make it up to us, you’ll have to be as nice to us as you are to your crew.”

“Uh... A little forward tonight, aren't we?”

Tina and Wiska had been awfully aggressive since that dinner party. They usually maintained a professional distance, and when they flirted it was easy to play it off as a joke. But suddenly they'd gotten a lot more direct.

“We realized somethin'.”

“The subtle approach doesn't work on you.”

“There it is...” said Mimi.

Elma smiled wickedly. “Finally figured it out, did you?”

These women! No respect for my feelings!

“So from now on,” Tina declared, “we're gonna come at you head-on 'til you break.”

“Please don't break him, Sis.”

“Go for it!” said Mimi. “You're welcome to him.”

Elma agreed. “You two don't have any baggage. As long as it doesn't disrupt Hiro's other relationships, it's fine. Right, Hiro?”

“Don't put me on the spot!”

If I showed the slightest interest, it'd all be over. The twins would probably break into my room and pounce that very night. I needed to get them off my back long enough to mentally prepare.

Tina turned to Mei. “How about you, Mei? Whaddya think?”

“Me? I don't believe this is a matter for me to speak on. It's the Master's decision.”

“But Mei, you...”

“I do surveil you, yes. Not because I distrust you, but simply because you are not members of the crew.”

“Cool. So what if we quit our jobs at Space Dwergr and officially join y'all?”

“As I said previously, this is not a matter for me to speak on. However, in a purely objective view, that arrangement would have many potential benefits.”

Both twins' heads swiveled toward me.

I took a deep breath. "Listen, it's not that I'm not flattered. But frankly, ever since the dinner party, you've gone a little nuts. I want you to think carefully about this and make sure you're not getting carried away. If you really are sincere, I'll need to figure out how to accept your feelings."

All eyes in the room were on me. There was a moment of thoughtful silence.

"Boooring," Elma groaned.

"Way to make a couple of gals feel rejected!" Tina complained. Wiska said nothing, but she looked just as deflated. I couldn't see Mei's face from where I was sitting, but Mimi was staring at me in puzzlement.

"What is it, Mimi?"

"It's just... Well, you were pretty eager to accept Elma, so I'm surprised you've gotten more cautious."

"That's true..." I rubbed my chin, thinking, as I stole a look at the twins. Why *was* I so uncomfortable? I'd gotten used to the freewheeling sexual morality of the Empire, I didn't have any concerns that getting closer to the mechanics would affect our working relationship, and they didn't come from the noble class with its convoluted marriage etiquette. So why wasn't I into this? Was I just not attracted to them?

"Maybe we're not close enough yet," I decided. "There's no reason to rush things, is there?"

"It's 'cause you've already got three girls to satisfy you, huh? We've gotta up our game."

"No, no, it's not that! Look, I like you two, and I'm protective of you. You know that, right? I've assigned Mei to guard you and given you battle bots. If pirates or nobles kidnapped you, I'd risk my life to get you back. No question." I fixed Tina with the most serious gaze I could muster as she glared back. If this didn't reassure her, I had no more cards to play.

She grunted in annoyance. "What the heck? Don't give us that oh-so-serious look. If you like us that much, why won't you include us?"

“These are two different things. I’m telling you I want to take things slowly. I’ll give it serious thought, too.”

Tina sighed. “Wis?”

“Well, we can’t force him. If he really means what he says, we shouldn’t rush anything.”

“Ugh! Goody-two-shoes. We agreed we felt the same way! Now you’re makin’ it sound like I’m the only one complainin’.” Tina puffed out her cheeks angrily. Wiska giggled and poked said cheeks.

It seemed things had settled down for the time being, but I’d have to start taking these two seriously. I hated leaving an issue up in the air, but damn, I really did have too much on my plate already.

I was going to have to man up, but a man’s only got two arms.

As we set out for Leafil Prime in the morning, I kept the previous night’s conversation in mind. We’d be landing on Leafil IV—Theta to the locals, I reminded myself—in the *Black Lotus*, so the Krishna crew had little to do but wait in the lounge for our descent. Full control of the ship was in Mei’s hands. That gave the rest of us the opportunity to slow down and focus on our personal lives.

To Tina and Wiska, it was an opportunity to plop down on either side of me and snuggle up as tightly as they could.

I sighed. “So we’re really doing this, huh?”

“You said we should get closer,” Tina chirped. “This is close, ain’t it?”

“Sorry. Does it bother you?” Wiska stammered.

“I didn’t say that.”

They wiggled closer. They’d changed out of their jumpsuits and into loose street clothes, so I could feel their comforting body heat.

When I looked down and to the left, I saw Tina’s carnivorous grin. When I looked down and to the right, Wiska glanced up and blushed nervously. Sure,

they were extra cute from this angle, but the clinginess was getting me worried.

Across the room, Mimi watched with amusement. Elma frowned at her. "You're enjoying this a bit too much," she told Mimi.

"It's just adorable how embarrassed he is."

"Is he? Looks to me like he's having the time of his life."

"Don't feel left out, Elma. You're adorable too!"

"Hey!"

Mimi hugged Elma. At least they were having fun in their own way. Letting them gang up on me was a hundred times better than having them snip at each other. Crew relations were my responsibility. I'd sown those seeds, and I had to reap what I sowed.

"You've got a big job ahead of ya, hon," Tina warned me.

"Hey, this wasn't my idea. If you think I'm not up to it..."

Wiska coughed politely. "I need some attention too, you know."

"Yeah, well... I know you're shy, Wiska, but when you need something, you have to say it with your whole chest. I try to keep everybody happy, but I can be dense. Don't let me neglect you."

"What about me?"

"I know you'll make my life hell until you get what you want, Tina." I couldn't resist ruffling her hair. She squealed and yelled at me to stop, but she couldn't hide how pleased she was. Wiska nudged me. I patted her head gently, suspecting she'd prefer less roughhousing.

"See? Time of his life."

"Is that so bad? We're all getting along!"

Elma sighed. "You're too much for me, Mimi."

Mimi blinked innocently, but I agreed with Elma. Mimi had adapted to mercenary life more thoroughly than any of us, even refusing to join the Imperial family in favor of spacefaring. No doubt about it: she was one tough merc.

Meanwhile, the *Black Lotus* closed in on Leafil IV.

Chapter 3:

Tropical Planet Leafil IV

DURING THE DESCENT, we could see that most of the land on Leafil IV was covered in forest and jungle. Our readings told us to expect hot, humid climates. In the Imperial classification system of habitable planets, Leafil IV was described as a tropical world.

As I stepped out of the *Black Lotus*, the hot, damp air hit me like a wall. I gazed up at the cloudless sky. “Pretty muggy here, huh?” It wasn’t uncomfortably hot, but the humidity was incredible. It reminded me of Japanese summers.

“Really?” said Elma. “This feels normal to me.”

“I can’t believe it,” said Mimi. “This is nothing to her.”

If anything, Elma was glowing. Her ears perked up.

The twins trotted out, unconcerned. “This ain’t nothin’ to me, either.”

“It’s nowhere near as hot as the boiler districts in the colonies.”

So this climate didn’t bother elves or dwarves. It was only me and Mimi who felt bogged down.

I turned back to give our ship the once-over. “From the ground, you really get an idea of how massive the *Black Lotus* is.”

“Indeed. Skithblathnir-model motherships are among the largest maneuverable spacecraft.” Mei caught up to me with ease. Of course a Maidroid wouldn’t be bothered by the climate. In her crisply ironed uniform, she looked as cool as a tall glass of iced tea.

The dock where we’d landed was a massive facility that resembled a cross between an airport and a shipyard. The *Black Lotus* monopolized the largest dock.

“Generous of them to give us free parking,” I said.

“Your deeds have already borne fruit, Master.”

“I can’t claim all the glory, can I?”

“You did carry out the raid singlehanded,” said Mimi. “Well, you and the battle bots.”

“It was a group effort, but you led the fighting, Hiro,” Elma agreed. “And you made the crucial decisions. You’re the captain, after all.”

“Thanks, you two, but don’t sell yourselves short. We’re a team, got it?”

Truth was, I felt a little guilty about hogging the action and leaving the boring non-combat stuff to the crew. If I didn’t have that support, I’d have to sell the *Black Lotus* and go back to cruising around in the *Krishna*. The *Black Lotus* allowed us to take bigger jobs and make more money, but it required a ton of work: managing and selling inventory, shipwide maintenance, docking requests, and the thousand other odd jobs that kept a ship that size flying.

“Oh, hon, look. The welcome party’s here.” I looked in the direction Tina was pointing and saw a bus-shaped vehicle speeding our way.

Wiska put up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. “That looks like an antique vehicle, but it moves so quietly. It must be well-maintained.” She was wearing a frilly dress instead of her usual work jumpsuit, but she still had to analyze any machine she saw.

The bus braked silently in front of us. Out stepped a stunning elven woman in a cheongsam-like dress made of lustrous white fabric. The cut suited her slim figure, and the long slit up the side showed off a stunning expanse of thigh. Her hair, like Elma’s, was silver.

“Oh ho... Ouch!” My appreciative reaction was rewarded with a jab in my side and a slap on my rear end. Elma and Tina had held back from their full strength, but their double attack still hurt. *A guy can look, can’t he? I mean, come on! This woman’s deployed advanced head-turning technology.*

The elven woman ignored my outburst. “Thank you for waiting. Is this Sir Hiro’s party?”

“Yeah. Thanks for coming to greet us.”

“But of course; you are our benefactor.” She turned to Elma. “I see a member of our clan is among you.”

“I’m from the Rosé Clan, Willrose branch bloodline. We left for the stars during my great-grandfather’s days.”

“Of course, the Rosé Clan. Given your hair color, I was certain of it. You and I share the same roots.” Our guide’s smile grew more open.

Elven clans had distinctive hair colors? That kind of made sense, since most members of a clan would be genetically related. But with intermarriage, surely you couldn’t guess someone’s clan loyalty by hair color alone. Elven biology was a mystery, though...especially when it came to their breeding arrangements.

“Enough chitchat,” called a voice from inside the bus. “Don’t make our guests stand around. Get ’em on board.”

“Very well. Follow me, please.” The guide gestured for us to step into the vehicle. Even with all our luggage, it was roomy inside.

We’d packed changes of clothes and hygiene products, of course, but also a few laser guns in case of trouble. I hadn’t been able to resist bringing my swords. We hadn’t bothered with laser rifles, grenades, armor, or anything else we might need for serious combat, though. Since I’d read about the humid weather, I’d packed chameleon thermal mounts for the whole crew. They’d kept us cool even on that terraforming planet, so they ought to help when we were strolling outdoors on Theta.

The guide noticed my swords. “Are you nobility, Sir Hiro?”

“Well, sort of. It’s just an honorary title.”

“He was awarded the Gold Star,” Elma informed her.

“Forget about it. I’m not here to strut around like a noble. I’m a mercenary through and through.”

Brandishing my title like a weapon seemed petty. I didn’t go out of my way to hide it, and I’d use it when I needed to, but I didn’t like showing it off for no reason. “So what’s the schedule?”

“First we’ll show you available accommodations near the Theta General Port.

Afterward, we'll be happy to escort you to any local attractions you might like to visit. The welcoming banquet is this evening."

"Sounds good. I can't wait to see what this place has in store."

What were the "local attractions"? Shops? Museums? Art galleries? I'd even take a zoo or an amusement park. Or maybe someplace we could experience traditional elven culture, which was sure to be fascinating. Beyond all that, though, I had my feelers out for those rumored medicinal drinks...

"A banquet?"

"Oh, wonderful!"

"Ha ha! I can't wait!"

Mimi, Tina, and Wiska were entranced by the promise of more elven food and drink. The way to a woman's heart really was through her stomach. Not that I had room to talk, of course, since I'd planned this entire vacation to look for soda.

Elma pursed her lips. Noticing my concerned glance, she said, "Now that we've landed on Theta, I should pay a visit to the main branch of my clan here. We split in my great-grandfather's time, but they're still family. I visited once when I was a little girl, but I haven't seen them since then."

"Makes sense. I'm sure we can find time to do that. You don't expect any family drama, do you?"

"Hmm... Well, I doubt it's anything for you to worry about. Just keep in mind that I'll be going out one day."

"Let's go together. If we take the *Krishna*, we'll be there in no time. I'd like to see your roots, too, Elma."

Her frown turned into a smile. "Really? Very well. If it suits our schedule, we'll do that."

I was relieved to see her loosen up a little. After all, we were on vacation. So far, everyone was friendly and welcoming, and there was no sign of danger. For once we could kick back, enjoy ourselves, and take care of our few errands when we felt like it.

Our first stop was an elven village near the port, clearly set up to give visitors a taste of the local culture. We managed to get in a little sightseeing without any silly developments like, say, a beautiful elf's brother randomly challenging me to a duel.

The first hotel we were shown to was a sprawling one-story inn that reminded me of traditional Japanese ryokans back home. I'd never actually stayed at one, but I'd seen them on TV. I don't even know if I've got the name right; it's not like I was taking a lot of luxury vacations. Back then, I wasn't bored or crazy enough to learn about things I didn't care about, and the main thing I cared about was gaming.

"What a lovely place."

"Yes, very relaxing."

"It's got one heck of an atmosphere."

"It's the elven philosophy of beauty in simplicity, Sis."

"The service seems quite satisfactory as well."

The inn was a hit with my crew all right. The guide showed us large baths, both indoor and outdoor, fed by a natural hot spring. Our suite would have a private outdoor bath. The large public baths were divided into men's and women's areas, but the private baths were another story. I couldn't wait for tonight.

We checked in at once. Lightened of our luggage, we set out to start our vacation.

I sidled up to our guide, who had introduced herself as Liliun. "So what is there to see around here?"

"I'm glad you asked. The most popular local attractions are our museums and galleries. There's a cultural museum with a first-rate collection of elven artifacts and works of art, a natural history museum showcasing our rich wildlife, and of course several excellent art galleries."

All of them sounded interesting, but I was especially curious about the natural

history museum.

“I’d like to see the cultural museum,” said Mimi.

“Anything’s fine with me,” said Elma.

“I wanna see some artwork,” Tina chimed in.

“I’m willing to go anywhere,” said Wiska.

Mei didn’t offer an opinion. In situations like this, a Maidroid usually deferred to her master.

Rather than toss in my vote, I asked, “Where’s the best place to buy souvenirs?”

“There’s an art museum with an exceptional selection of elven arts and crafts for sale. The other museums have gift shops too, of course, but theirs are smaller. That said, I recommend the café attached to the cultural museum. It has a menu of traditional cuisine passed down through each clan.”

“Okay. Let’s go there first for lunch, then we’ll see the art museum with the big gift shop, and if we have time after that, we go to the natural history museum. Sound good?”

The group accepted my idea and got ready to head to the cultural museum. It was just about noon: perfect timing.

“Are you coming with us?”

Lilium smiled elegantly in response. “Yes. The chieftains asked that Hyshe and I serve as your guides throughout your visit.”

Hyshe was our bus driver. He was from the Minpha Clan, like the Nekt guy I’d saved, and he hadn’t had much to say. But he did his job well. He seemed content to stay in the bus while we made our stops, so we weren’t likely to get to know him well.

“You may think nothing of it, Sir Hiro, but we elves are deeply grateful for all you’ve done,” Lilium continued. “Those pirates killed many elves in their attacks, and even burned our forests. They nearly destroyed our ritual temple and dealt great damage to our sacred tree. You must understand, we want to thank the man who stopped them.”

“Hey, do what you must.” I had no idea what the ritual temple and sacred tree were, but if they were important places to the elven faith, the elves must’ve been pissed as hell when the pirates attacked them.

Before long, we arrived at the museum. The exhibits were interesting, but nothing really stood out. We learned about how the elves of Theta lived, what sorts of tools they used in their everyday life, and what had changed after the Empire came along.

“It looks like Thetans still live pretty much the way they did hundreds of years ago,” I said.

“So it seems,” Mimi agreed. “They’ve adopted some modern technology, but they’re still very close to the earth.”

If I understood the museum displays, the elves had incorporated medical and infrastructure technology from the Empire, but not much else. The pillars of their lives remained the same: farming, hunting, faith in spirits, and living in harmony with the forest.

“Bows and arrows, knives...” Tina whistled softly. “That’s real wild huntin’.”

“They’ve developed some clever traps as well, but for the most part, it’s rather—” Wiska stopped herself. “Yes, ‘wild’ is a good descriptor.”

Careful, Wiska. Don’t let them hear you calling them barbaric or muscle-headed.

I stepped in. “I get the idea that for elves, hunting is about more than making a kill. It’s a sacred act. They want to compare their strength to the forest they worship and accept the blessings of nature. They probably think it’d be wrong to do that with high-tech weaponry, autonomous drones, and battle bots.”

“Kinda hard to wrap your head around, ain’t it? Energy weapons are so much more efficient.”

“I don’t think it’s about efficiency. It’s about... Imagine somebody hired you to restore a classic ship, one of the really antique models. You wouldn’t soup it up with the latest upgrades and change it into a modern cruiser, right? You’d try to keep whatever the owner liked about that model.”

“Ohh! Now that makes a little more sense!”

My explanation seemed to satisfy the twins, but I could see the elven worldview confused them. Dwarves couldn't resist shiny new things. As a general rule, they were eager to adopt new technologies and innovate scientific advancements. To them, the traditional, slow-paced lifestyle of Theta had to seem weirdly inefficient.

“Master Hiro, look over there! I think we're allowed to try out elven bows and arrows.”

“Archery, huh? I've never fired a bow.” I'd seen one hung on display at a lodge on a resort planet, and I'd even picked it up, but I hadn't tried to use it. Why not give it a try now?

“If we're going to do that,” said Elma, “Mimi should wear a breastplate. You don't want a bowstring to snap you there.”

“You can show us how it's done, Elma.”

“We wanna try too!”

We gathered around the museum's archery corner and played with the weapons. It really wasn't anything more than play—the arrowheads had been replaced with harmless balls of cloth. But the elf supervising the corner warned us that it was still dangerous to point them at people, so we treated them with respect. The supervisor and Lilium taught us how to safely test-fire the bows.

Mimi, Tina, and Wiska couldn't hit a target to save their lives.

“It won't fly straight!”

“Man, this is hard.”

“Aww! I missed!”

Mimi hadn't put on a breastplate, and I suspected her boobs were getting in the way. As for the dwarves, the bows were just too big for them. They'd probably have done fine with bows made to their stature.

“Well, I haven't practiced much, so this is all I can do,” Elma said offhandedly, as one arrow after another flew from her bow to its target. Maybe her smaller chest helped.

At first, I had as much trouble with a bow as Mimi did. But when I held my breath, my hand steadied and time slowed down. It wasn't so different from firing a laser gun. I could feel when I was ready to hit the target. From then on, none of my arrows missed their mark. Was this another of my mysterious skills?

"You're doing well, Master Hiro."

"Eh, I shoot things for a living. It's basically cheating."

Those unexplained abilities of mine continued to gnaw at me, though. Back when I received a medical exam in the Arein System, I was assured that I was as healthy as could be, so it probably wasn't worth worrying about. But worry I did. I had that time-slowng power, I could understand seemingly every language in the Empire without a universal translator implant, and this kind of aim didn't seem natural...

When we'd had enough fun fooling around with archery, we had lunch at the museum café. Next stop: elven arts and crafts. I couldn't wait to see what those were like.

"Y'know," I said, "these places don't feel like big planetary attractions. More like a local hometown archive."

"A hometown archive?" Mimi asked.

"I dunno, it's just the whole...rustic feel."

Mimi didn't look any less confused.

So far, elven architecture seemed to be limited to modest-looking one-or two-story buildings with a vaguely Japanese feel. The walls were mostly wood, the roofs all the same shiny tile. It was nice, don't get me wrong, but it felt less like an exotic vacation and more like wandering around my hometown on a summer afternoon.

"Don't dawdle, hon. Let's get goin'!" Tina took my hand and dragged me toward the art museum.

"Okay, okay, I get it! Don't yank my arm out of the socket!"

The twins seemed impossibly strong for such tiny people. Mei was by far the

strongest member of the crew, being a robot, but Tina and Wiska were easily tied for second place. They were really dense, too; they were much heavier than..... No, I'd better cut off that line of thought. I didn't want to get murdered!

The foyer of the art museum was dominated by a black, boxy vessel adorned with gold. The golden floral pattern gleamed against the shiny black surface.

"Whoa!" said Tina. "Now that's somethin'."

"Cool," I said. "Lacquerware."

"Lacquerware?"

"That's what people on my world called things with that kind of shiny coating. I think it was made of resin. I don't know if this is the same thing, but it looks like it."

According to the label, it was pretty similar. Elves made decorative vessels by applying natural tree sap from Leafil IV with a maki-e style powdered finish.

"Looks like you were right, hon."

"It's so lovely," Wiska sighed. "How do you think they get such a deep black?"

"Good question," said Mimi. "It really is unique."

Sure, it was pretty, but I had to wonder what it was useful for. It might make a nice case for jewelry or fancy cosmetics, but an unrefined guy like me wouldn't know what to do with it. Maybe I could use a lacquerware comb...but my synthetic resin brush did the job just fine. I had a sudden vision of a lacquer comb in Mei's gleaming black hair, though... *Note to self: take a look at the gift shop later.*

There were plenty of other beautiful things to see in the art museum. Like luxurious silk fabrics—apparently woven from threads collected from a moth the size of a large dog—and elegant clothing made from them. Among the clothes was a cheongsam-like article like the one Lilium was wearing. The label explained it was a traditional women's garment in the Rosé Clan.

"Hon, look, look! A spirit silver hunting knife!"

"Interesting. It almost looks like a boning knife."

The twins dragged me over to a long knife made of shining silver. Ordinary silver wasn't good for blades, but apparently spirit silver was. Now I thought about it, it was probably a completely different material that just had a similar name. For all I knew, spirit silver was tough stuff.

"Looks like an awful small blade for huntin' such fierce prey," said Tina.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It sounds like they hunt a lot of dangerous animals, and this knife can't cut through reinforced armor like my swords can. Maybe they use bows and arrows to take down the big game."

"Oh, and these are like sub-weapons in case they get cornered!"

"Or else they're for finishing off and butchering the prey."

"Sis!" Wiska called from up ahead. "Here's a blade we can handle!"

As we caught up to her, I glanced over my shoulder and noticed Mimi, Elma, and Mei chatting by the folk costume displays. It looked like they were asking Elma something.

"Ooh, hon, check this out! It's a lot lighter than it looks."

"Really? Hand it over." I picked up the spirit silver hunting knife, which was connected to its display podium with a sturdy anti-theft cord.

The blade was pretty thick and about thirty centimeters long. It was a big, no-nonsense knife: the straight, single-edged blade ended in a sharp tip. The simplicity reminded me of a dagger or katana back on Earth. Even when blunted, it could probably pierce human flesh with ease.

"It really is light," I said. "It almost feels like a toy."

"Much lighter than steel," Wiska agreed. "It feels more like aluminum."



“A knife this light but strong as steel? That’s got to be useful.”

“For some stuff, maybe,” said Tina. “Too bad PAM metals ain’t heat-resistant.”

“That’s true,” said Wiska. “They fall apart under lasers and other high-energy beams, so you can’t build ships with them. They’re no good for mono-swords, either. The first time you have to deflect a laser, your blade turns brittle and useless.”

“Yeah, it sucks.”

While the twins got deep into yet another engineering discussion and I scrutinized the dulled blade of the knife, I noticed something strange. Was it me, or was the knife moving in my hand?

“Hey, does this thing have a vibrating mechanism or something? It feels like it’s shaking.”

“I dunno. A forger might put somethin’ like that in a blade to make it cut better, but if you can feel it move while you’re holdin’ it, it’d just screw up your aim, right?”

“If you can feel a vibration, it must be defective. You’d better put it down. It might be dangerous.”

“Got it.”

But why would a display weapon in a museum with a dulled blade still have a mechanism like that inside? If there was something messed up about it, though, I didn’t want to be the one to find out. I moved to put it back on its podium.

The instant I let go of the knife, the blade shattered. In spite of myself, I yelped. It hadn’t just cracked; it was shattered into tiny pieces, as if it had been too fragile to survive being gently set down. “Is...is this my fault?”

“Dunno about that,” said Tina, “but you *were* the last one to touch it.”

“What did you do to it?”

I couldn’t think of anything I’d done wrong, but that didn’t mean I could slink away and pretend nothing had happened. I had no choice but to show Liliu.

She stared at the shattered blade in bewilderment. “What in the spirits’ name happened here?”

At least I wasn’t the only one who was confused. This was definitely not normal.

“This is embarrassing,” I said, “but it broke when I set it down.”

“We didn’t even touch the blade itself!” Tina interrupted. “I swear!”

“That’s right,” said Wiska. “All we did was hold it by the hilt and look at it from different angles.”

“Though let’s be clear, this guy was the last one to touch it.”

“Sudden betrayal!”

“Just tellin’ the truth, hon. We love you, but we ain’t gonna lie for you.”

“Yeah, but...”

Museum staff gathered around us as we argued, but they all seemed just as confused by the sight of the shattered blade. No one seemed able to comprehend what had happened.

“You didn’t, say, fire at the blade with that laser gun?” asked one elf.

“No! Of course not! Why would anyone do that?”

“Who can say?”

“Spirit silver *is* vulnerable to heat,” said another. “But would a shot from a laser gun make it blow to pieces like that?”

“Even if it would,” said Tina, “he didn’t shoot anything! Like he said, he didn’t have no reason!”

“Perhaps not...”

I still didn’t think I was at fault, but I *was* the last person who’d touched it, and I didn’t want to look suspicious. I offered to pay for the damage. However, the staff refused.

“We don’t know why it broke,” said an elf who seemed to be the curator, “but it certainly doesn’t look like you did it on purpose.”

The museum's surveillance footage confirmed that we hadn't done anything unusual. We were off the hook. The shattered hunting knife would be sent to a lab for study.

As the staff cleaned up, Elma rolled her eyes at me. "There really is something about you that attracts trouble."

Mimi laughed dryly.

"Seriously, I didn't do anything!" Even if Elma was right, how could I have predicted that a sturdy-looking knife would shatter in my hand?

"Excuse me," Liliu said, "but it's getting dark. Shall we return to the inn? After a short rest, I can escort you to the feast."

"Good idea," said Elma. "Let's do that." The rest of us agreed. After this accident, we were all ready for a break. I hoped the banquet would go a little more smoothly.

Inexplicably breakable artifacts aside, I'd enjoyed the art museum. It was so big we hadn't had time to see everything, and I hoped we could fit in another visit during our vacation. Before heading back to the hotel, I stopped at the gift shop and made a few purchases.

"Good taste." Elma smirked at me.

"This is perfect!" Mimi beamed.

"Aw, but I didn't get you anything..." Despite her apologetic tone, Tina couldn't conceal a grin.

"A-are you sure this isn't too expensive?" Despite her hesitation, Wiska looked up at me expectantly.

Meanwhile, Mei stood silent, her eyes fixed on the lacquerware comb I'd bought her. I'd picked out one decorated with the image of a lotus, since she was doing so well as the pilot of the *Black Lotus*. But did she like it? She was just kinda...staring at it. And not moving.

I nudged Mimi. "I don't know anything about picking out gifts. Is she...?"

Mimi followed my gaze to Mei. “I think it’s perfect for her. Keep up the good work.”

“Easy for you to say...”

In the end, I’d given Elma and Mimi lacquerware accessory cases, thinking they could use them to keep the jewelry I’d bought them in the past. Tina and Wiska had gotten matching sets of elven hair pins with cords: one with a red stone for Tina, and one with a blue stone for Wiska.

“What a lovely case,” said Elma. “I like the daffodil pattern.”

“What’s on mine?” Mimi asked. She didn’t know much about flowers.

“That’s a sunflower,” I told her as I watched the rest of the crew show off their gifts.

“Look, he picked ’em out to match our hair!”

“It’s so pretty...”

They were all way more into their presents than I’d hoped...except for Mei, who was still frozen. Was she okay?

“Sunflowers are perfect for Mimi,” said Elma, examining her daffodil-covered case, “but what’s the idea behind mine?”

“I don’t know flower language or anything. I just picked out the one that felt like you. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Hmm... So this is what you think of me, eh, Hiro?”

I didn’t know what that was supposed to mean, but Elma seemed to be pleased. It wasn’t like there was any deep meaning behind the case I’d chosen for Mimi, either. Sunflowers just seemed to fit her bright, cheery personality.

The mechanic twins promptly asked Liliu to put their hair up using their new hairpins. They admired the results on one another.

“One little stick is enough to tie up all your hair, huh?”

“We’ll have to learn how to do this ourselves, Sis!”

“It’s easy to learn,” Liliu assured them. “If you like, I can send you some video files later.”

Everyone left the museum in high spirits. It seemed my tastes weren't so bad after all. Either way, I was just happy that they were happy.

From the hotel, Mimi and Elma had their cases shipped back to the *Black Lotus*. Mei carefully returned her comb to its case and deposited it somewhere in her uniform. Somehow, she was always able to stash things in hidden pockets. *Incidentally, is it normal for the phrases "maid uniform" and "hidden pockets" to inspire lascivious thoughts? Or is it just me?*

I couldn't help glancing down to see if Mei had dropped the case into her cleavage. Noticing my gaze, she cupped her breasts with both hands and offered them to me. "Is this what you'd like, Master?" Her boobs weren't as big as Mimi's, but they were more than enough to satisfy anyone. Mimi was just off the charts.

"No, no. Not right now, please."

"Very well."

This wasn't the time to start groping her. There'd be plenty of chances to get to that later, when the mood was right.

Instead, I suggested I comb her hair with her new comb. She had such long, silky hair, it ought to be fun.

We were alone in the common room of our suite. I'd finished my bath, but Mimi and the twins were still getting ready. Mei, being a Maidroid, hadn't needed a bath. We sometimes bathed together for sexy fun, but her regular maintenance pod runs were enough to keep her clean. She did change her clothes when they got dusty, which was pretty often, and she always took good care of her hair, which I loved.



“Weren’t you researching the local clans?” I asked Mei as I combed her hair.

“Yes, Master. Would you like to discuss them?”

“As long as it’s safe to talk here, sure.”

“I believe it is. In brief, the elven clans on this world are led by three political factions.”

As Mei explained, one faction was dominated by the Rosé Clan. This faction was the most outwardly focused, expanding its reach to the outside—that is, into the Grakkan Empire—and securing elven power beyond the Leafil System. Elma’s family and clan, both called Willrose, belonged to this faction.

The second faction, led by the Grald Clan, was much more conservative. It believed that elves should keep to their mother planet, Theta, where they lived alongside the spirits and their sacred tree. This faction was religious, emphasizing elfkind’s connection with spirits and nature. It held that traditional elf culture, as it had existed before the Grakkan Empire came along, was the true path to happiness.

The final faction was a centrist group led by the Minpha Clan. Elves in this faction believed that, while ancient traditions and culture were to be respected, the Grakkan Empire had plenty to offer too. They pushed to incorporate outside influences and innovations into the Leafil System to better the lives of the elves there.

The differences between the factions were reflected in the ways they lived. The Rosé Clan traveled freely between Theta and outer space, and members living on Theta often had homes in the Empire style made with cutting-edge technology. Some of them dabbled in magic, but they didn’t emphasize it as part of their daily life. Basically, they were urban progressives—they sounded a lot like Elma.

In contrast, the faction led by the Grald Clan lived in the forests, in old-fashioned treehouses. They used almost no modern technology and relied on magic to survive. They were orthodox elves, through and through.

And the Minpha Clan’s faction? They installed modern home appliances in traditional treehouses, used Empire-crafted gadgets to assist in hunting and

farming, and generally borrowed from both cultures to build what sounded like comfy lives. Some cared a lot about magic, while others barely practiced it.

“I’m guessing the Grald and Rosé Clans don’t get along well,” I said.

“That’s correct. They have opposing stances on many issues.”

That jogged my memory. “Didn’t the pirates attack a wedding between heirs from the Grald and Minpha Clans?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“In that case, is it possible the Rosé Clan sicced the pirates on them to keep the clans from getting too friendly?”

“That is a common suspicion among the other clans, yes. Most of the star system police are from the Rosé Clan, after all, so there is concern they may have leaked information to pirates or looked the other way during the attacks. The heads of the clan are under heavy suspicion.”

“Huh... Oh, well. None of our business, right?” We’d saved captives from the Grald and Minpha Clans, smoothing things over for the Rosé Clan in the process. All three clans had reasons to be grateful to us, and we hadn’t pissed any of them off. We’d be out of their star system in no time—we had no reason to get tangled up in their political squabbles.

Or did we? Elma *was* part of the Rosé Clan...

“All we can do is back off and let the elves do their thing.” I shrugged. “Go with the flow.”

“I believe that would be best. If necessary, we can easily leave the system.”

“You bet.”

Freedom was the best part of being a mercenary. If the going got rough, we could drop everything and get going. Somewhere without trouble, hopefully.

Chapter 4:

Elven Hospitality

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?”

“How’s it look?”

“Cute, cute. Very cute.” I applauded, genuinely enjoying the fashion show.

The girls were all decked out in elven attire. Tina and Wiska had chosen outfits a lot like the one Tina had worn to dinner on Leafil Prime: loose layers of woven cloth with bold patterns, probably tribal designs. To me, they looked similar to traditional Ainu clothing.

I turned my gaze to Elma. She glared at me. “What?”

“Just thinking about how beautiful you look.” She wore a slim, simple cheongsam-style gown like Lilium’s. It looked perfect on her slender silhouette, and the long slit showed off her legs. “It looks great on you. Yeah...perfect.”

“Thanks. By the way, this color makes it a dress for married women.”

“Really? Even when it shows all that skin?”

“Elven men aren’t as lustful as humans, I’m told. Not that I’d know from experience.”

“Is that so?” Were elven men so disinterested in sex that women had to dress up just to get them interested? All those gorgeous elf babes? Were they insane?

“Way to show off your rack, Mimi!”

“Tina! Knock it off!” Mimi made flustered—and frankly provocative—noises as Tina grabbed at her ample bosom. Mimi had dressed in something that looked like a mini yukata, or maybe a Roman toga, or a robe from the Taisho era... It was vaguely Japanese, but not exactly. At any rate, Mimi looked cute in anything.

Mimi composed herself. “I can’t believe how mature you two look.”

“How come? We’re grown women, y’know.”

The elven clothing revealed that, underneath the jumpsuits Tina and Wiska usually wore, they had adult curves after all. I’d gotten glimpses in the past when Tina occasionally decided to strut around the lounge half naked after a bath, and once or twice I’d done a double-take at the realization that, yup, she did have boobs.

While the girls teased each other, one of the hotel staff arrived to inform us that everything was ready. Representatives from the elven clans had arrived to welcome us. I realized we’d be the last group to show up for dinner.

What was I wearing? My usual mercenary duds, of course. I didn’t own much else. I didn’t care about impressing the clans, and at least one of us ought to look like a merc, right? Plus, in my work clothes I’d be ready to spring into action in an emergency.

Mei, of course, was still in uniform. Maidroids didn’t wear anything else unless specially instructed. The maid outfit was more practical than it looked. I’d learned from experience that she could hide plenty of nasty little weapons in there: darts, pellets made of reinforced ship’s plating, you name it.

As we entered the banquet room, a voice called out, “Mercenary Captain Hiro.” All heads turned. It was hard to stay calm with all those eyes on us. Most of the elves here looked friendly, but a few, from various different spots in the room, were watching us in wide-eyed surprise, like they’d seen a crew of ghosts.

Well, it wasn’t like I could do anything about it. We followed our guide to what was clearly the seat of honor. Only Mei remained standing, stationed behind me as usual.

Then the formal introductions began.

I came first. The master of ceremonies described me as the mercenary hero who’d taken down the pirates who had been terrorizing the Leafil System, succeeding where the system’s own military had failed. In this telling, I’d charged in alone, ignoring my own safety, to rescue Tina of the Grald Clan and Nekt of the Minpha Clan. I was praised to the high heavens for showing no mercy to the pirates, avenging both the elven victims of their raids and Leafil

IV's sacred tree.

"Serving as Captain Hiro's right hand," the master of ceremonies continued, "she bears Willrose blood, making her kin to the Rosé Clan."

He made a big deal over Elma's clan alliance. Elma had mentioned to me that she didn't think it was appropriate to identify herself as part of the Rosé Clan, since her family had been distant from the home system for so long and she'd set off on her own path as an independent mercenary. At the same time, she wouldn't go out of her way to correct the record. It wasn't wrong, exactly. It just wasn't the whole story.

The flowery introductions continued; no one in the crew escaped. Once it was done, a big-shot elf—the chieftain of the Grald Clan, maybe?—proposed an unfamiliar toast: "Thank you, maternal forest and visitors from the sky."

"Thank you, maternal forest and visitors from the sky!" echoed the room in response.

Then the banquet began. The food was surprisingly...not weird. For my money, I was just happy we weren't being served bugs.

The twins dug in immediately, and in no time they were trading comments.

"Isn't it delicious?"

"Mm. Elf food ain't half bad."

"Even so, I wouldn't mind a little more spice."

"Nah, it's good enough as-is."

Wiska was right. The food didn't have much of a kick. Still, there was a kind of dashi stock flavor to a lot of the dishes that more than made up for that. Between that and all the stewed dishes, it really reminded me of home, even though it was unmistakably alien.

We were presented with a platter of what we were told was a staple elven food. They looked like mochi wrapped in oak leaves. Okay, another dish similar to Japanese food...were we supposed to eat the leaves too? I had a leaf in my mouth and was starting to chew when I glanced at the other tables and noticed that no one else was eating the leaves. Oh well. It didn't taste half bad.

A dish that looked like sweet kashiwa mochi turned out to be some kind of dumpling filled with minced meat. The combination was delicious.

Other platters were piled with samples of the planet's natural bounty: boiled root vegetables, meat and offal soups, roasted meat in fruit sauce, skewers of grilled and deep-fried meat and vegetables, and crispy salads.

"That's some classy liquor."

"It's delicious, right?"

Somehow, the twins had gotten their hands on some wine—or something that smelled grape-y, anyway. Tina might have looked like a little girl, but she quaffed like an old man. Meanwhile, Wiska was sipping at it like a refined lady. Again I was struck by how different they were. Chalk it up to the difference in environments. Due to family circumstances, Tina and Wiska had grown up apart. Tina had even run with a gang in a dangerous colony. When she was reunited with her sister, though, she'd abandoned that life and sworn off crime for good. She got a job with Wiska at Space Dwergr, which was how the two of them met me and the crew at Vlad Prime. I didn't want to probe too much into their painful pasts, but maybe I ought to ask for details sometime.

Elma ate quietly, doing her best not to stand out. I'd passed along the information Mei had given me about the clans; she was probably trying to avoid doing anything that could get us wrapped up in planetary power struggles. I suspected it was too late to stay out of trouble at this point, but it was nice of her to try.

As the dinner started to wrap up, a group of elves stood and approached us. Judging from the way they held themselves, they were important elders of some kind, but they looked as young and attractive as all the other elves in the room, which is to say, very. It was kind of surreal. There was no way I could tell which of these beautiful, slender youths was the leader I'd be expected to address.

Fortunately, one of them spoke up. "I'd like to thank you once more for saving my daughter. I am Zesh, chieftain of the Grald Clan."

Chieftain Zesh had chestnut hair like Tina's, and he was as handsome as she was beautiful. His face bore rakish scars, and his eyes were even more piercing

than his daughter's. He was muscular for an elf, albeit in a wiry way. He wore loose clothes with a tribal design, like those Tina and Wiska were wearing.

Another elf stepped forward. "I am Miriam, chieftain of the Minpha Clan. I would also like to express my gratitude. Thank you so much for saving my son Nekt. If not for your aid, he could have lost his life that day."

She spoke brusquely, but it was hard not to be won over. She was a beautiful woman with blonde hair and almond eyes. She wore a robe similar to Mimi's, but patterned with a design like the ones on Zesh's clothing—almost like a shrine maiden with folk patterns on her kimono. She wore more jewelry than I'd seen on anyone on the planet so far. It suited her lush beauty.

No one else in the group introduced themselves. Apparently the Rosé Clan chieftain wasn't with them—not surprising, if what Mei had told me was true. Maybe they'd decided to keep their distance so they wouldn't start arguing in front of the visitors.

"It was just chance," I said, "but I'm glad to help the people of Theta. Thank you for holding this incredible banquet."

"But of course. May I ask you something?" Chieftain Zesh's expression had turned grave.

"Sure, go for it." What could this possibly be about?

"Who are you? The power flowing from you is almost like that of a great spirit... No, perhaps even greater. You look like a mere human, and yet..."

A great spirit probably would've come up with a better response than, "Say what?" Great spirit? Power flowing from me? What the hell was this guy talking about?

"Those of us who are familiar with spirits can sense incredible power within you. It's as if Leafil itself has descended from its seat in the stars to greet us."

Utterly confused, I turned to Elma for help. She shook her head. "Don't look at me. I barely know the basics of magic. I don't have the power to see stuff like that."

"She's a member of the Rosé Clan, as I recall? That's to be expected. Few of

their clan pursue a life of spiritual training. I doubt any of them have spirit sight at all. It's no surprise that she failed to realize your power."

"Don't talk down to Elma," I said. "Nobody's ever said anything about this—ever. I just got a checkup at an Imperial med center with all the latest tech."

"The Grakkan Empire has strong materialist leanings," said Chieftain Miriam, narrowing her eyes. "Magic and spiritual communion—what outsiders might call psionics—are not their strong suit."

It was true I hadn't seen any magic at the capital. The Empire was way more into hard tech: artificial intelligence, cybernetics, bioengineering. The noble swordsmen were kind of like Jedi, but they got their superhuman abilities through biohacking, not any kind of supernatural Force.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I asked the chieftains.

"It's difficult to say," said Chieftain Zesh. "Whence do you hail? Perhaps we can find an answer there."

"Hail, huh? Um..." If I told them I came from another universe, things would get complicated real fast. No way was I about to do that. "The thing is, I have a touch of amnesia. I woke up a while back, drifting through space in my ship. I think I was in some kind of hyperdrive accident, but I don't know what the hell happened... Um, sorry for getting too familiar."

"Worry not. You are our benefactor, and we understand that you are an outsider. We ask only a minimum level of courtesy. But...a hyperdrive accident, you say?"

"I know little of hyperspace science," said Chieftain Miriam, "but during interstellar travel, people traverse other planes of existence, do they not? Perhaps Sir Hiro made contact with the spirit realm."

"If that was all it took, then the universe would be full of people like him. But perhaps there's a connection. This memory loss intrigues me. He may have entered the spirit realm through hyperspace and accomplished some great deed there. Then, when he returned to the physical realm, he was forced to leave his memories behind."

"In that case, he should have become like a spirit himself, and his corporeal

form would have dissolved. Was his body reconstituted with the added properties of a spirit upon his return?"

"That may be it. Or we may be entirely wrong. Either way, his situation is remarkable."

By now, their debate was making exactly zero sense to me. Elves were nuts! All I knew was that I'd run up against extra-large trouble. I resolved to make a run for it. I had nothing but bad feelings about this.

"We're good and full now, and we've enjoyed so much of your hospitality," I said, backing away. "I'm thinking now's the perfect time for us to clear out."

Chieftain Zesh blocked my path. "That won't do. We still owe you so much."

"Don't be silly," Chieftain Miriam agreed. "It would be a shame to let your power wither and go to waste. All you need is just a little training."

Yeah, I figured you'd say that. That's why I'm trying to scram!

Also, quick aside: is it me, or did someone give me too many specs during character creation? I'm already super-strong since the tournament. Now I'm gonna turn into a Jedi knight? All I want to do is ride around in my spaceship and shoot things. What's the point of making me physically stronger? Just give me new guns or something!

"That's amazing, Master Hiro! You could be a real-life super hero."

"I don't wanna be a comic book character! Though...I dunno, maybe I do?" Now that I thought about it, it would be kind of cool to have powers like that Cobra guy who could fire a gun with his mind. Or the Bottoms super-soldier guy with the paper-thin mechas. Or a Jedi... I really needed to find some new references.

"If your potential is as great as they estimate, Master, I believe it would be worth trying." It was rare for Mei to assert an opinion. Maybe this was serious.

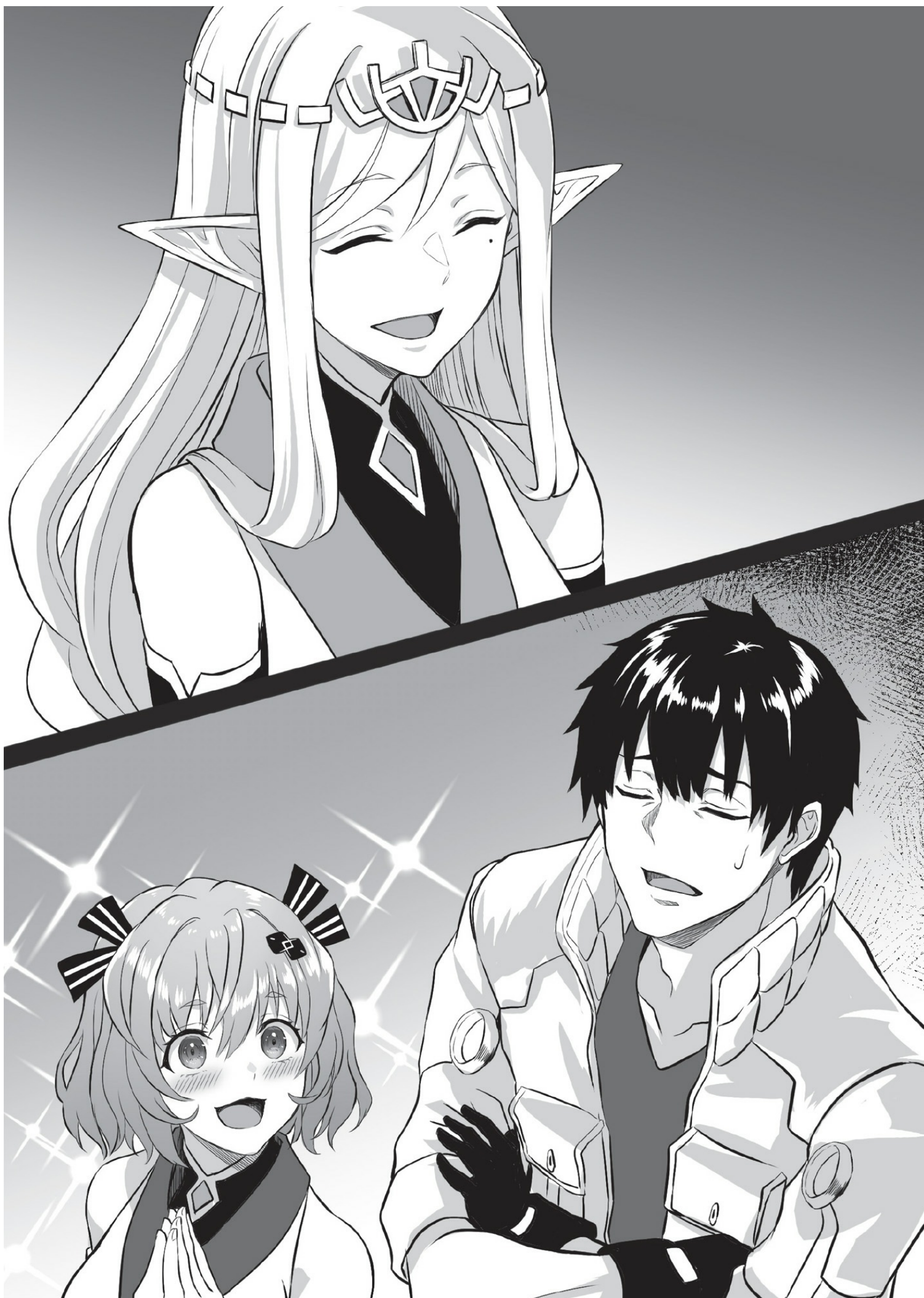
"Maybe you do have untapped natural abilities," said Mimi. "It always seemed strange that it only took you a few months of training to hold your own against noble swordsmen. You're not even augmented."

"I say we oughta find out your limits," said Tina, blushing for some reason.

Wiska nodded vigorously, her eyes sparkling. No surprise there; those two loved comic books. I sometimes overheard them chatting with Mimi about their favorite superheroes.

“Well...” I could feel myself giving in. “Maybe. If we have time.”

“I highly recommend it,” said Chieftain Miriam solemnly. “Contact us, and we’ll arrange the best possible training environment.”



According to my briefing from Mei, the Grald clan was way more into magic than the Minpha Clan. So why was the Minpha chieftain so enthusiastic about training me? Maybe these two chieftains' shared interest was part of the reason for the arranged marriage...

Well, it could wait. Tomorrow was for sightseeing, soda-searching, and absolutely no serious business.

After the welcome banquet, the crew and I sat down together on the enormous futon in our hotel room. We'd asked for a single large suite, and tonight we'd put down a futon big enough for all of us to sleep on in one big pile. I'd volunteered to take the edge, though—I was a chivalrous guy.

"Okay," I said. "What was the deal back there?"

"Don't ask me," said Elma. "I've only learned the absolute basics. It sounded like there'd be no way to notice this without really high-level magic."

"Do you know anything, Mei?"

"My apologies, but no. Machine intelligence understanding of psionic technology is still lacking, so I can provide little analysis." Though her face remained expressionless, I thought I could see a hint of disappointment.

"We're Empire born and raised," said Tina, "so..."

"All we know about magic is that elves can use it," Wiska added. "I think there are other cultures with psionic technologies, but they're a long way off."

"Yeah, I heard there's a Holy Empire out there that uses magic, but I dunno any details."

"Interesting," I said, "but I guess it doesn't matter,"

"Don't it?"

"No matter how you look at it, this reeks of trouble, and I don't need it. Who cares if I've got weird powers? They're not worth messing with."

Maybe I'd want to know more about my powers if they went out of control or hurt other people—or me—but so far nothing like that had happened. I could

just understand languages and slow down time by holding my breath—or was I the one who sped up? I still wasn't sure about that one.

The possibility of understanding or bolstering those powers wasn't worth the extra attention they were sure to attract. It wasn't like I needed to get better at hand-to-hand fighting. The magic Elma had shown me was pretty cool, but I wasn't about to stir up the hornet's nest for it.

"You're acting cagey," said Elma. "Are you afraid of something?"

"Of course I am. Even I don't know how I wound up in this universe. I'm terrified that it's going to turn out to be something a lot bigger than little old me."

"Hey, wait a sec... What're you talkin' about, hon?"

Elma, Mimi, and I all gasped. I'd forgotten that we'd never told the twins the truth about myself. Now that the elven chieftains had opened that can of worms, though, it was time to come clean.

"No point hiding it now. Let's talk about it."

With that, I told them the story of how I'd come to this universe—from my perspective, anyway. I still didn't know how it had happened, and by now I didn't really remember what I'd been doing beforehand, either. Had I fallen asleep at my gaming rig with Stella Online open, or had I been in bed? Or were those both false memories, covering up something completely different?

"The point is, I'm not from this universe. Or at least, my memories are from another world."

Tina laughed. "No way! So to you, this is all a holo-game!"

"Not exactly. It's just a lot like the game I was playing. Stella Online didn't have elves or dwarves, or Space Dwergr, or machine intelligence. This place seemed like the game world when I first got here, but I'm starting to think the differences outnumber the similarities."

"How odd," said Wiska. "It sounds like a holo-novel."

"Honestly, he'd sound like a holo-novel protagonist even *without* that part."

"He did rise to platinum rank incredibly quickly. And he was awarded a Gold

Star.”

Suddenly everyone was staring at me like they expected me to do something amazing right then and there. *Sorry, girls. I don't feel up to putting on a show.*

“Platinum rank, Gold star, it doesn't matter,” I said quickly. “As far as I'm concerned, I'm just a merc with enough skills to back up his words.”

“A platinum-ranker with a Gold Star isn't just a merc,” Elma retorted. “You held your own against nobles in a swordfight. You had an audience with the emperor himself.”

“For sure.”

“Agreed.”

“Yup.”

“Yeah...”

I clapped my hands over my ears. “Blah blah, I can't hear you! Look, I don't need to be the mysterious hero from another universe or have magic powers on top of everything else, so let's back off from this whole line of thought. If this is a novel, where's it heading? With me being forced to save the universe from some giant crisis?”

Nothing could suit me less. I was happy cruising space, having fun with the girls, and living a life of comfort with occasional thrills. If I could find soda, life would be perfect. I'd started house-hunting on planets, but I didn't even care that much about having a home. It just seemed like the most convenient way to drink soda whenever I wanted. If I could safely open a soda can on the *Black Lotus*, I'd give up on the house.

“Was there anything like that in the game?” asked Wiska, her eyes blazing. “Can you use your game knowledge to predict a galaxy-wide threat?” Why was she so excited about galactic threats?!

“No. I mean, it's not impossible...”

Elma, Mimi, and Tina all joined in the excitement.

“You mean there's a chance?”

“Is there?”

“Ya mean it?”

We *had* dealt with some pretty major threats, but we always managed to come out on top in the end, so it never felt all that dangerous.

“I’m just saying—the crystal life-forms, for instance. There was one game event that involved contact, defense, investigation, and eradication, in that order...”

“Come to think of it,” said Elma, “that battle with the Mother Crystal was the first time I’d seen one.”

“I leaked information about the Mother Crystal to Serena back then... It’s a good thing we cleaned up that mess fast.”

“That’s a crazy thing to say out of nowhere! Are there more of them?”

“Well, there were a lot of events in the game where we had to deal with those things. There was one event where they attacked in a huge swarm. Each entity was the size of a small ship. They weren’t that tough on their own, but there were so *many*. They’d attach themselves to colonies and devour everything.”

This got a gasp from the crew.

“They turned the devoured colonies into nesting grounds and spawned more. That event was the worst. A bunch of colonies and stations were infested and had to be destroyed.”

“S-so how did you defeat them?”

“With crystal life-forms, the big ones control the smaller ones...or, like, the little ones are just extensions of the big ones. If you ignore the little ones and take out the big ones, then the little ones will self-destruct along with them. But before we figured that out, it was a long, losing battle. In the end, we had our largest attack ships use FTL drives to close in on the big one and take it down with coordinated fire.”

“Is there a chance that could happen for real?”

“I dunno. Maybe it’s happened in the past, and some society in this universe

figured out the same solution we did. If a mega-swarm attacks now, though, we've got the information we need to fight it."

"Fair enough." Tina sighed. "No point worryin' about it now, I guess."

"R-right," Wiska stammered.

"What else is different in your game? I wanna know all about the tech stuff."

"Oh, yes!" Wiska perked up. "That would be very interesting."

"You really think learning about SOL could help us?" I asked, dubious.

At the twins' urging, I shared everything I could remember about the spaceship tech in Stella Online. At last I got them off my back by pointing out how late it'd gotten. We needed to get some sleep if we wanted to go sightseeing the next day.

"Aww," Tina pouted.

"I'll tell you plenty more next time."

"We'll hold you to that."

My stories seemed to strike a chord with the twins. They kept chattering about SOL tech as they lay in bed, forgetting all about their efforts to remind me they were mature adults. And I heard every word, because despite my plan to take the edge of the futon, I got stuck right in the middle, with a twin on either side.

Were they trying to trap me? I already knew I didn't have a chance at escape.

I woke up the next morning to a twin clinging to each arm. My annoyance at being treated as a body pillow was more than outweighed by how soft, warm, and sweet-smelling they were. Why did girls smell so good, anyway? We were all using the same hotel shampoo and conditioner.

Elma and Mimi wandered in from the next room, still in their pajamas.

"Well, look who's getting along," said Elma with a smirk.

Mimi was grinning too. "Should I be jealous?"

“I’m thinking of heading to the bath,” Elma added. “We didn’t wake you up, did we?”

“Nah, I was just about to get up. Think I’ll join you.” I sat up, awakening the dwarves. They muttered sleepily and rolled over.

“Argh...mornin’.”

“Good morning—” Wiska realized how close we were and jumped away with a yelp. *What’s with the freak-out? You insisted on lying down next to me.*

Wiska happened to jump right into Mimi’s arms, and Mimi gleefully caught her. Even though the twins were older than she was, Mimi softened around them, doting on them like they were a couple of kids.

“Aw, Wiska! Let me poke those soft cheeks!”

“Yeep!”

As Mimi pinned Wiska down and pinched her cheeks, I woke Tina, who was still clinging to my right arm. She sighed and wrapped her legs around me, too. “Gimme five more minutes...”

“No, I’m getting up to take a bath. Why don’t you get ready with Elma and Mimi?”

“Aww! But I wanna go with you, hon!”

“Wake up and get your brain working! If people saw us naked together, I’d be arrested!”

“What’re you talkin’ about? I’m a grown woman!”

“But you look like a kid—what are you doing?”

Without a word, Tina pressed herself against my arm. Naturally, she hadn’t worn underwear to bed—and under her none-too-thick nightgown, her body was a lot more mature than I’d thought.

“What was that about me lookin’ like a kid? Hmm?”

“Okay, okay, I yield. You’re all woman. But that just makes it even more inappropriate, right?”

“Ya think, hon?”

I nodded gravely. "I think, hon."

"Yes, yes, you're both very cute," said Elma. "Now get ready so we can start the day."

"Yes, Mother," I deadpanned.

"Who are you calling Mother?"

"Ooh!" Mimi perked up. "C-call me Mother, too!"

"Mwargh?!" Wiska's latest yelp was drowned out as Mimi, leaning forward, accidentally shoved the smaller girl's face into her cleavage.

I'd said it as a joke, but Mimi seemed genuinely into it. *Why does that excite you so much? Also, please let Wiska go before you suffocate her.*

Once I was bathed and dressed, I went downstairs to find Liliu, our guide, waiting in the lobby. "Good morning," she said.

"Morning." I noticed that she'd ditched the slinky dress for an outfit closer to what the crew and I had packed for vacation. "Not dressing up today, huh?"

"Did you prefer the gown?"

"Nah. Actually, I feel more relaxed with you in casual clothes." I was a simple man. A nearly bare leg sliding out of a long slit in a dress made it hard for me to focus on anything else. I already had three girlfriends, almost too much for me to handle, but I'd have to be made of stone to ignore a gorgeous woman in an outfit like that. "I know I brought it up, but can we change the subject? I feel like it's already verging on sexual harassment."

She chuckled lightly. "Certainly. I'm here to serve as your guide again today, if you like."

"That'd be great. You sure you don't have anything better to do?"

"Quite sure. My superiors have directed me to assist you."

"Superiors, huh? What exactly *is* your job, Liliu?"

This elicited another smile. "I'm a member of the extended Rosé Clan employed by the foreign affairs department of the autonomous planetary

government. To put it simply, you may consider me a civil servant.”

“I see...”

So our fancy digs and guided tours were provided by the planet’s foreign affairs department. The elven government of Leafil IV was pretty much autonomous, so it made sense that they had staff to deal with visitors from the Empire.

“The Rosé Clan handles all of Theta’s ties with the outer worlds,” Liliun explained. “Diplomacy, star system defense, inter planetary commerce and marketing, tourism... My department has a wide range of duties.”

“Wow. It sounds like a big undertaking.”

“It certainly is, but the profits are equally large.”

“And the risk, I bet.”

“Ah ha ha...”

I guessed the work of Liliun’s department was trickier than she let on. If they were in charge of interplanetary negotiations and star system defense, they’d be held responsible if anything went wrong. According to Mei’s report, the Rosé Clan had been censured for failing to take down the pirates.

I shrugged it off. “None of my business. If you’re willing to show us around, we can’t ask for anything else.”

“You may leave that to me. Do you have any requests? If you’d like to get an impression of Theta’s natural splendor, I recommend the zoos and botanical gardens.” Liliun held out her tablet to show me some pictures of intriguing animals, including a cute little furball and a vicious-looking reptilian creature. “Or you could return to the art museum. You only got to see a fraction of it yesterday.”

“Good ideas. But I’ve already got a request.”

“Of course. I’ll happily show you any place you’d like. Where do you want to go?”

“A soft drink factory. A popular one, if possible. If they offer tastings, that’s even better.”

“A soft drink factory?” Liliu’s perfect brow furrowed. I couldn’t blame her for being confused, but this was important to me. Vital, even.

It was then that the drunkards launched their offensive.

“If drinks are on the itinerary,” Elma cut in, “why don’t we visit a brewery?”

“Great idea, hon!”

Wiska nodded along. “That sounds lovely.”

Not all three of them! They’d outvote me!

Mimi raised her hand. “Before any of that, I say we get breakfast. So far, the local cuisine has been as delicious as we hoped it would be.” She was still stinging from the time when we’d tried a so-called local specialty that turned out to be just processed cartridge food. Talk about a letdown.

Liliu gave it a moment of thought. “There’s an area near the border between the Rosé and Minpha territories that is home to many food production facilities. Some provide tours. Would that do?”

“Solid plan. Let’s go with that.”

Along the way, I could explain a little more about what I was looking for. Elma had mentioned drinking a “medicinal concoction” similar to root beer on Leafil IV during her childhood visit. Surely I could find something on this planet that could pass for soda.

Fingers crossed...

Spoilers: there was no soda. In fact, Leafil IV had no fizzy drinks whatsoever. By some cruel trick of fate, the concept of carbonated beverages had never come to the planet.

We ended up touring one of the planet’s major breweries of nonalcoholic drinks. When I tried to describe soda to the tour guide, a company big shot overheard us and got curious.

“Do you have an idea for a new soft drink?” he asked me. “I wouldn’t mind hearing your pitch.”

“Nah, never mind,” I said. “Even if I could explain it clearly, I don’t have the technical know-how to make it happen.”

As the business guy pressed his case, though, I realized this could be the opportunity I was looking for. Maybe, with just a little effort on my part, I could get a company on Theta to make soda for me.

I turned to my crew. “I’ve gotta talk to this guy. You all have fun.”

“I shall join you, Master.”

“You sure? Okay, let’s go.”

Mei followed me as the rest of the gang continued the sightseeing and taste-testing. The tour was about to move on to alcoholic drinks, which had everyone but the two of us excited. I gave Mimi a final worried glance. She was a cheap drunk, and a few too many free samples would leave her staggering. Hopefully the others would look after her.

“Right this way, sir.” Yet another elf, apparently the guide’s superior, ushered us into a reception room. “Now, what is this all about?”

I did my best to explain. “Carbonated drinks are soft drinks that have carbon dioxide added to them. They’re fizzy and stimulating and hit your throat just right.”

I shared every scrap of knowledge I had about soda. Unfortunately, it wasn’t much. During all the time I’d spent chugging soda in my old life, I’d never bothered to find out how it was made. All I knew was that factories made some kind of flavored syrup and injected it with bubbles.

“Oh, and it’s chilled, too. I think that helps the gas dissolve.”

“I see, I see...” The big shot took notes on his tablet terminal.

“They usually come in sweet or fruity flavors, so I think a lot of drinks would taste good with carbonation. I don’t know any specific recipes, but you’ve got people who know how to make stuff taste good, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What else? Oh, dry ice...um, solidified carbon dioxide. If you have that, you can make it easily. Mix dry ice into a drink, and you’ve got instant carbonation.

Once you've got the formula, you'll need to build equipment to mass-produce it, but that might be an easy way to test it first."

"Very interesting information. What about alcoholic drinks?"

"You can definitely make carbonated beer. And hard ciders. There are some carbonated fruit drinks with low alcohol content too..."

"Interesting, interesting."

"Oh! And since the drinks are full of gas, you have to be careful about how you bottle and ship them. Soda can explode in low-pressure environments, so you might not be able to store them in zero gravity. I'm pretty sure that's why they haven't caught on in the Empire."

"Thanks for the warning. But with the right packaging, such products could be sold planetside without much trouble." The guy smiled from ear to ear. He was in product development, and he seemed familiar with all the beverages sold on Theta. He'd never heard of carbonated drinks, and the business opportunity intrigued him.

I, on the other hand, was dejected. Maybe someday elves would make fizzy drinks, but for now I was out of luck. Bummer.

The brewery paid me for my idea in crates of their most popular products. They'd offered me a lump sum of money, but it wasn't much to me, so I asked for the equivalent in booze and juice instead. We could drink it ourselves or sell it at some colony with a thirst for elven imports. It beat having to sign a contract, and it was more than enough payment for the meager amount of info I'd been able to provide. Smart choice, if you ask me.

I related my tragic tale to the crew.

"Huh. You don't say?"

"Tough break, hon."

"Oh, well."

Elma and the twins shrugged off my misadventure as if it had nothing to do with them. To be fair, it didn't, really...but the pile of bottles surrounding them

helped explain their disinterest. They'd emptied at least a dozen.

Mimi, meanwhile, was blitzed out of her mind. As soon as I'd sat down with the group, she'd plopped into my lap, made a drunken come-on, and passed out, giggling to herself.

I gestured down at her. "Can someone tell me why you all let this happen?"

"I swear," said Elma, "I only took my eye off her for a minute."

"You can't blame us!" Tina protested. "How could she get drunk off so little booze?"

Only Wiska attempted a genuine apology. "We're sorry," she said, so sweetly that my annoyance instantly dissolved.

Unfortunately, the day was a wash. I'd been forced to face the hard truth that my quest for soda was at a dead end, leaving me lower than I'd been in a long time. Mimi was out cold from a few sample beverages. And the other three were way beyond what anyone could fairly consider sampling.

I turned to Lilium. "I feel like I should apologize for my crew being...like this."

"Don't!" she said with a smile. "It's reassuring to see that you're ordinary people after all." She'd tagged along on the tour, but she hadn't partaken in the sampling. She was on the clock, after all.

"At least I got the bad news out of the way on our first stop. Let's change our plans for the rest of the day."

"What? You don't want to check out any more breweries?"

"Our drinkin' tour's just begun!"

"What a shame..."

Et tu, Wiska? The three of them were insatiable. How did they still have functioning livers?

"You drank all that, and you still want more?" I demanded.

"We're just gettin' started, Hiro!"

"Elven liquor is refined and delicious, but the alcohol content's a bit low. It's basically juice!"

“I could go for a little more, too.”

I couldn't stand up to a unified assault. I wasn't giving in, I told myself; I was keeping up crew morale. Not a very convincing excuse, but it'd have to do.

“I get it. I dragged you along on my choice of activity, and now it's your turn. If that's what you all want, let's keep up the drinking tour.” This got three cheers out of the three drunkards. I didn't understand their love for alcohol one bit, but they probably felt the same way about my soda obsession. “Can you find us a good brewery, Liliu? It doesn't matter if the prices or the alcohol content are high. Let's go for quality.”

“Understood. Wait just a moment while I make the arrangements.”

While Liliu looked up our next destination, I took care of Mimi. *And drinkers, you'd better get ready to go. Yes, put away the liquor. Hurry up, now.*

The brewery Liliu found turned out to be way more fun than I expected. It was nice to chill out and watch the girls party. We used a medical pod to sober Mimi up, and in no time she was ready to order bar food with me and sample the nonalcoholic tastes of Theta.

But this peace felt an awful lot like the calm before a storm. I had to be ready for anything.

Chapter 5:

My First Crash-Landing

THE NEXT DAY of our vacation dawned. Since the brewery tour had been in Rosé Clan territory, Liliun suggested we visit the territory of the Grald Clan today.

Of the three clans that dominated Theta, the Grald Clan lived most closely with nature. As romantic as that sounded, it meant that their territory was mostly untamed primeval forest. The clans' settlements were scattered throughout vast expanses of wilderness.

"So make sure you're armed, everyone," I said as we stopped at the *Black Lotus* first thing in the morning. It wasn't docked too far from our hotel, so I'd asked Liliun to arrange for us to return to our mothership for supplies.

"Aren't we going sightseeing?" Mimi asked dubiously.

"Sure. It's just that we'll be sightseeing in a deadly jungle on an alien planet."

"It's not alien to me," Elma protested. "I guess I've never been to Grald territory, though."

"Don'tcha think you're overreactin'?"

"Better safe than sorry, Sis."

I considered packing the environmental adaptive suits that could protect us from venomous insects, parasites, and sudden temperature changes, but they were a little flashy for a sight seeing trip—they looked like sci-fi riding suits. Still, I wanted to be careful. "Don't take wilderness lightly," I said. "Real primeval forests—not maintained resorts—can be dangerous."

"You think?"

"Really?"

"He's right," said Elma. "The forests are full of the bones of careless hikers."

Mimi, Tina, and Wiska were all born and raised in colonies. I didn't think people who'd lived their lives in artificially managed environments would really

be able to wrap their minds around life in the great outdoors. At least I knew one or two things about camping.

“Wear clothes that expose as little skin as possible. Your work jumpsuits are perfect.”

“I don’t wanna wear work gear on my day off!” Tina complained.

“Frills will rip off the moment they get caught on a branch. We want simple and durable, not sexy.” I handed out chameleon thermal mounts. They’d keep us cool and comfortable even in thick clothes, and they had a proven record of holding up in even the harshest environments.

“I do think you’re going a bit overboard,” said Elma. “Remember, we have a guide.”

“You’re not wrong, but I’ve decided to err on the side of paranoia. Don’t you think it’s been a little *too* quiet since we got here?”

Elma frowned, but she didn’t argue. Much as I wanted to enjoy our downtime without a care in the world, it was impossible to shake the feeling that something wasn’t right—and I knew Elma could feel it too. How could she criticize me for being cautious?

Meanwhile, Mimi poked at my backpack. “What’ve you got in there?”

“A survival kit, portable rations, a distress beacon, and a backup energy pack.”

“What’s in the survival kit?”

“First-aid nanomachines, a molecular disassembler and reconstitutor, stuff like that.”

“Molecular what?”

“Remember how, during the tournament at the capital, the Imperial Fleet disassembled and reassembled battlefields for gunfights? It’s a compact version of that.”

Mimi snapped her fingers. “Oh, of course!”

This long-named device was basically an ultra-advanced portable 3D printer. It could disassemble materials like wood and ore and convert them into whatever

you needed, using saved presets. It'd be perfect for building a quick shelter if necessary.

How did it work? Beats me. I didn't ask questions about Empire technology, I just used it. It was hard enough to believe that a device the size of a TV remote could transform and reconstruct raw matter, but there was no question that it could. I'd looked up explanations of the theory behind it, but it was all a mess of incomprehensible jargon.

You'd think a device like that would make a useful weapon, but molecular disassembly was super easy to counteract. It worked best on natural resources like wood and minerals.

"What about the emergency distress beacons? You really think we'll need them?"

"Imagine we're deep in the woods and our guide gets wounded or separated from us. It's night. We're in the wilderness, visibility's low, there are dangerous animals skulking around. I want to be able to put up a shelter, call for help, and weather the night."

Tina scoffed. "Why not just call 'em with your handheld terminal?"

"We can only do that if there's signal out there. Big if."

"...We won't have a signal?"

"Not likely."

Mei had researched the area we'd be visiting, and it turned out most of Grald territory was outside of standard terminal reception fields. We'd be out of service. I was kind of surprised that something like that was possible in this high-tech universe, but Theta, of course, was lower-tech than most planets. The elves felt that terminal signals interfered with magical training. I had to admit, part of me wanted to scream, *Are you shitting me?*

"I'm glad you're taking precautions," Wiska said.

"I wouldn't worry so much if it was just me, and Elma can take care of herself. But with the three of you coming along, too, I need to be careful."

Mimi sighed. "I wish I could say you were wrong about me."

“You better not underestimate dwarves,” said Tina.

“Hey, Mimi, I trust you with my life aboard ship. And Tina and Wiska, I know how strong you are. But you’ve lived your lives in space. Planetary exploration is a whole new challenge.”

“What about Mei?” said Mimi. “Isn’t she coming along?”

“I’ve asked her to stay with the *Black Lotus*. We may need her to save our skins if things get rough.”

Mei spoke flatly from behind me. “As much as I regret being parted, such are Master’s orders.”

My initial thought has been that we might need her for backup if we ran into distress in the wilderness, but it also occurred to me that pirates might attack while we were off on our hike. If that happened, we’d definitely need someone back on the *Black Lotus*, preferably Mei, Elma, or me. As the captain, I needed to lead the expedition into Grald territory, and Elma, our resident elf, ought to be along too. That left Mei as the best member of the crew to stay behind.

“I still think you’re being too cautious...”

“If we’re lucky, we can come back tomorrow and laugh about how paranoid I was. Until then, make sure you’ve packed rations and water.”

There was no way to plan for every situation, but if we had to hole up somewhere, food and water were two things we’d absolutely need.

Lilium met up with us outside the *Black Lotus*. “Er, why are you dressed like that?”

“We’re prepared for a wilderness expedition.”

“And what are all those...things...you’re carrying?”

“We’re prepared for a wilderness expedition.” So what if I was repeating myself? It seemed simple enough to me. But Lilium clearly hadn’t expected us to show up armed to the teeth and wearing chameleon thermal mounts. The thermal mounts were printed with a hexagonal pattern; press a button at the collar, and they changed color to blend into the environment. They didn’t

provide perfect short-range cover, but they made the wearer extremely hard to spot from a distance.

Lilium coughed politely. “You needn’t be quite so prepared. Your guide will keep you out of danger.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I tried to appear wise, even enlightened. Maybe I looked funny in all that gear, but I had a feeling our hike wasn’t going to go smoothly. If trouble was going to find us on Leafil IV, it was sure to find us in Grald territory. We’d touch down, start out on a nice walk in the woods, and bam! Disaster! I knew my own luck.

“Well, at any rate, your transport is ready. Right this way, please.”

“Thanks.”

We followed Lilium, who’d given up on commenting any further. This was no time to care about attracting stares. Our lives were on the line. I was as serious as a heart attack. Anyway, nobody except Lilium was out on the tarmac to see us.

“See?” said Elma. “You worry too much.”

“Lilium looks so confused,” Mimi laughed.

“You can cool it, right?” said Tina.

“I think it’s a good idea to be prepared.” Wiska shuddered. “I looked into it myself, and it seems non-terraformed nature is crawling with insects! Just walking around on the surface of a planet can leave you with welts and rashes. It’s awful, Sis.”

“Whoa, really?”

“Tell you what,” I said. “If none of the stuff I packed turns out to be useful, I’ll buy each of you anything you want. But if I’m right, everyone except Wiska owes me an apology.”

“Bold offer.” Elma sidled up to me with a smile. “Anything we want, huh?”

“Anything reasonable. Don’t ask for a ship, now.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far. But I might ask you to splurge on some high-end

liquor.”

“No problem.” Judging from other times she’d stocked up on booze, it wouldn’t cost me more than 100,000 Ener at most. My wallet could handle it.

“It’s hard to guess what you think is reasonable, hon,” said Tina, “seeing as how you’re so *unreasonable* with cash.”

“Okay, okay. How about up to 100,000 Ener?”

“That’s not reasonable!” said Mimi. “I’d never ask for that much!”

“Honestly,” said Wiska, “you have no sense of what money is worth.”

I couldn’t believe they were showing mercy. “Okay, then 10,000.”

Wiska continued to gaze at me with pity. “No sense at all...”

“Ooh, big spender!”

Still too high, huh?

Lilium looked horrified by the amount of money we were talking about throwing around. “Truly, I cannot believe this conversation.”

Elma shrugged. “That’s mercs for you.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself.

“So this is our transportation, huh?” I said. “Very...unique.”

The twins circled around the thing, inspecting it. “How do ya think this works, Wiska?”

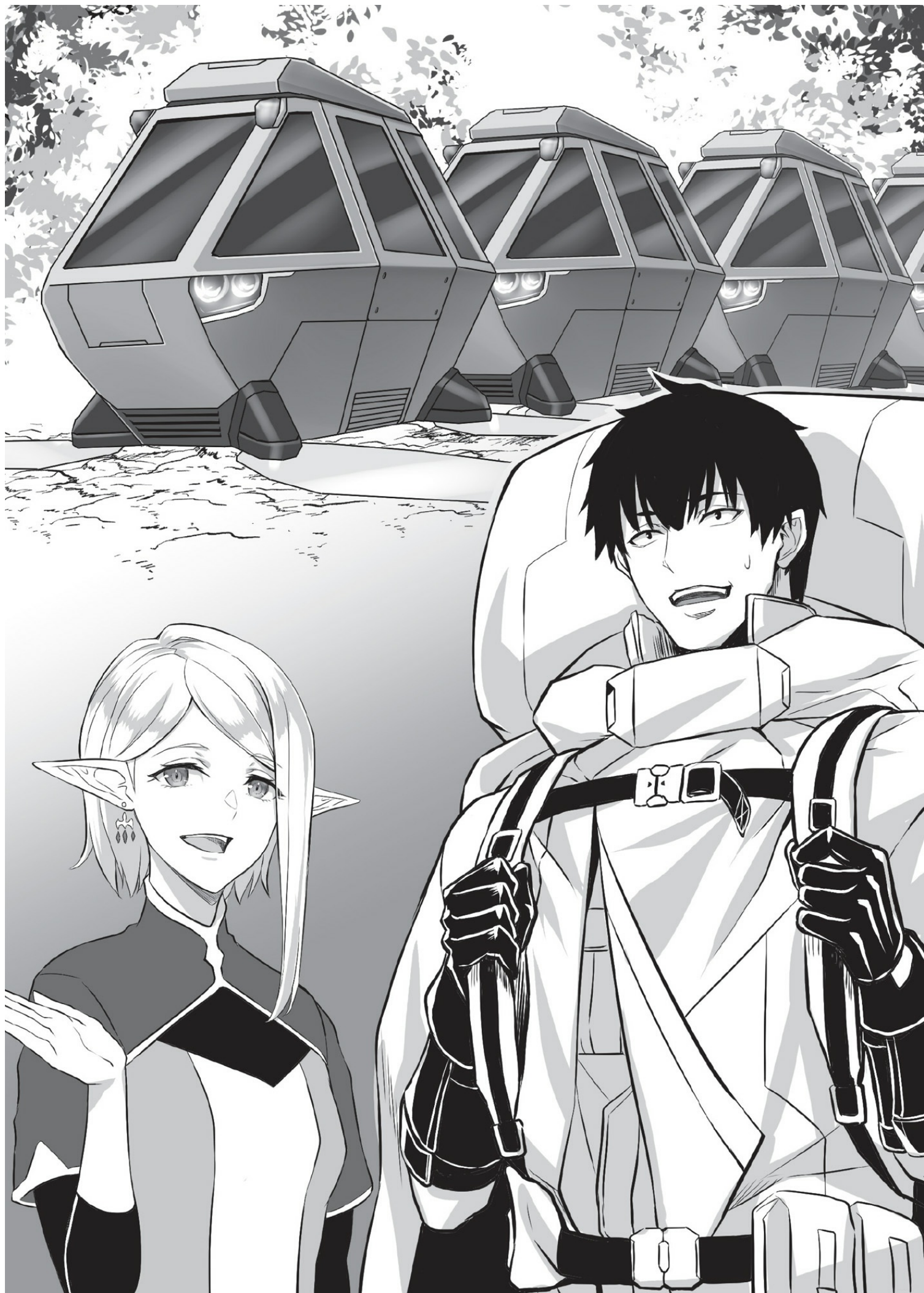
“It looks like an aircraft, doesn’t it? But where’s the engine?”

Lilium had led us to a vehicle shaped like a centipede with a bunch of dragonfly wings attached to it. The body of the craft was made up of four boxy cars, kind of like the gondolas on a Ferris wheel, with four insectlike wings each. As far as I could tell, there was no engine.

“Does this thing fly with magic, or something?” I asked.

“Yes. It uses the power of wind spirits to fly. The wings come from an animal called an ynmuriliu.” Princess Tinia of the Grald Clan strode up to us, smiling.

Her attendants, Miza and Mam followed behind.



“Yin...murlu?”

“Ynmuriliu.”

“Ynmuriliu.”

“There you go!” Tinia said, satisfied. Damn, she was just as pretty as always.

As Tinia explained, her father, Grald Chieftain Zesh, had ordered her to show their “benefactors” through Grald territory. I guess it made sense for someone we’d helped out to be our host.

But were we really supposed to ride there in a contraption with flimsy bug wings taken off a living thing, powered only by magic? Not many things in this universe fazed me anymore, but I wasn’t sure I had the guts for that.

“Is it safe?” I asked. “We won’t fall or anything?”

“Perfectly safe. Ynmuriliu fly with wind magic, and their wings, when properly processed, retain that power. As long as the craft is cared for, it will never fail.”

“No worries there. It’s in perfect condition.” An elf man climbed out of one of the cars. I recognized him as Hyshe, the guy who’d been driving us around for the past few days. That was the longest speech I’d heard him out of him yet.

“Well, no point wasting time,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

“The cars are small, though,” said Hyshe. “I suggest you keep to two passengers per car.”

“Then I shall sit with Sir Hiro,” Tinia said. “Miza may go with Misses Tina and Wiska, Mam with Mimi, and Lilium with Elma.”

Lilium bristled, but all she said was “Very well.” She might not like having her duties usurped, but she didn’t dare argue with the princess of a major clan. As for me, I thought the division of personnel was a little arbitrary, but it wasn’t worth complaining about. Tinia had probably put Lilium and Elma together because they belonged to the same clan and then divvied up the rest of the group at random. I wasn’t too surprised that she wanted a little alone time with me.

“Roger,” I said. “All aboard.”

Elma flashed me a sharp look. “Be careful, Hiro.”

“I know,” I replied earnestly. Elma was probably less worried about my physical safety than about some kind of honeytrap setup. Either way, I doubted Tinia would try anything, but better safe than sorry. “See you on the other side, girls.”

The mechanics gleefully jumped into their cars. “Later!”

“You know, I think I’m looking forward to this!”

Mimi glanced at me nervously. I nodded in reassurance, and she climbed into her car. Elma was already on board.

Tinia gestured to the last car. “Shall we?”

“Sure.”

The inside of the car was just as small as it looked. It was like a little train car, with a bench seat facing forward...I think it’s called a cross seat? You know what I mean.

“Wow, you really couldn’t fit more than two people in here, huh? It’s like it was built for dwarves.”

“There’s a limit to the flight power of ynmuriliu, which makes it difficult to build larger craft. As I understand it, the problem cannot be solved simply by adding more wings.”

“That’s not how magic works, huh?” If the thing flew by scientific principles like buoyancy or propulsion, you could make it fly better by adding more power. Apparently, psionic tech followed different rules. “It looks pretty, though, with the way it glows. Would they keep shining like that in space?”

“I wonder. The power of the wind spirits may not extend that far.”

“Dang, too bad. They’d make cool eco-friendly lights.”

“I understand that the spirit arts can be used in space in a limited capacity, so it may be possible... But the ynmuriliu population is quite low. We limit the number that can be hunted, so I doubt we could cull them for export.”

“I see.” I wasn’t too surprised to have my idea shot down. If the wings of

those ynmuriliu things were practical for making stuff like lights, the elves would've done it already. It sounded like they were too rare to kill for frivolous reasons. Anyway, all animal products, no matter how well-maintained, we bound to degrade over time.

Tinia changed the subject. "Sir Hiro, would you mind telling me more of mercenary life and outer space? The Grald Clan has so few opportunities to hear such stories."

"Sure, but I don't know where to start... I know! Why don't I tell you about space food?"

"I'm all ears." Tinia listened with rapt attention to my descriptions of automatic cookers and the foods that went into them, like food cartridges and artificial and cultured meat. I told her about the weird alien food Mimi ordered during our travels and that big caterpillar we'd had in the Kormat System. Tinia was fascinated by culinary culture. A few details seemed to gross her out, but she was eager to learn about exotic dining.

I moved on to explaining the mercenary guilds, space pirates, and Imperial Fleet. Time flew by—before I knew it, Tinia was interrupting to tell me we were halfway to our destination.

"Only halfway, huh? This is a heck of a long trip."

"Yes. We're technically in Grald territory now, but, as you can see, everything below us is primeval forest. Even the hunters of our clan rarely set foot—" Tinia fell silent mid-sentence. She peered out the window.

"What's the matter?"

"The ynmuriliu wings..."

I followed her line of sight to those glowing wings. Not just glowing—shining. They almost blinded me. Also, they seemed to be vibrating.

"Are they overheating or something?" I asked.

"No, only the pilot car provides propulsion. The passenger cars should simply float along."

"I don't like the look of this." I couldn't help but laugh dryly. "Can you contact

the pilot?”

“Our car doesn’t seem to be equipped for that.”

She was right. The car didn’t contain an intercom or any kind of control panel. My terminal didn’t work, either; it seemed we were out of range.

“Seriously?” I groaned. “I should’ve thought of this earlier, but what happens if you have to go to the bathroom in these things? Do you just have to wet yourself?”

“People usually relieve themselves before the flight... Er, I don’t think this is the ideal time to discuss such matters.”

“True, but we can’t just give up.”

There didn’t seem to be much we could do, though. We were stuck in a gondola with wings, connected to the other gondolas only by a coupler. We couldn’t reach the other passengers or even alert them by knocking on the wall. The total privacy of our car made us totally helpless.

“You think we could survive a fall from this height?”

“I hope things don’t reach that point, but...” Tinia gave me a curious look. “I’m surprised you’re not panicking.”

“I’ve been through some crap. This might be the worst crap yet, though.”

I’d had no shortage of trouble in this universe, but I’d always had options. This time, I couldn’t think of a single way out. Blow out the wall with a sword or laser gun so we could contact the next car? Nah, too risky. For all I knew, I might destroy the whole aircraft. I didn’t want to try some big dumb hero move that would put everyone else in danger.

The whole time I was thinking, I kept my eyes fixed on the wings. As I watched, two of them shattered. *Oh, hey. Just like at the art museum.*

The craft rumbled and buckled. For a moment I felt suspended in air. Tinia clung to me and screamed. Much as I liked the feel of her arms around me, I wished the circumstances were different.

Our car had lost the power of flight. It was held in the air only by its connection to the car in front of us. We were thrown against the wall as it

lurched wildly. I guessed the wings on the other side had shattered, too.

“Holy... You’re looking at a dead man.” For some reason, it felt like the thing to say.

“You’re awfully calm!” Tinia cried, clinging to me.

“Tinia?”

An unpleasant creaking noise came from the front of the car. The coupler was about to give.

“Y-yes?”

“Sorry for getting you involved in this.”

The instant the words left my mouth, there was a bang, and we were in freefall. Tinia shrieked.

“Don’t scream. You’ll bite your tongue.” I held Tinia’s head against my chest, curled up as best I could, and braced for impact. At this point, there was nothing to do but pray the impact didn’t kill us.

Then everything went black.

“Sorry for getting you involved in this.”

Why was this man apologizing? Why did he look so guilty? My organization had prepared the aircraft. If anything, it was my responsibility to apologize to him.

Without further hesitation, he pulled me close and tried to shield me from the inevitable.

Why did he throw himself into danger without a second thought? From the moment we’d met, that had confused me to no end. Charging into a heavily armed pirate ship was almost suicidal.

After the first time he saved me, I met him and his crew for dinner. When I asked him why he saved me, he brushed it off, insisting that he’d just happened by. He always seemed to laugh off our thanks. His face was hard to read, but it was easy to suppose he meant what he said. He was like a fairy-tale hero who’d

dropped in from some storybook world.

Strong, brave, humble. A bit hedonistic, but many heroes were, and the women surrounding him certainly seemed happy. They even praised his faithfulness, which seemed like the wrong word, given the circumstances. But perhaps it spoke to the generosity of spirit that was part of his charm—part of his heroism.

And it was this hero whom I naturally—

Naturally what?

I gasped as I awakened in his arms. Where were we? *Oh, yes. We fell... It seems he's saved my life again.*

As I tried to sit up, I realized something else: I smelled blood. Doing my best to remain calm, I slipped out of his arms and searched for the source of the scent. It wasn't me. Did that mean...?

"Oh, no..."

He was bleeding. A sliver of metal from the aircar was embedded in his side. And there I stood, uninjured. I had to do something.

Carefully, I pulled him from the wreckage of the aircar. If I did nothing, he would bleed to death. But extracting the piece of metal would open the wound. If I could somehow stop the bleeding...

Fortunately, the aura of spirits was thick in this wood. With luck, I might be able to stop the bleeding with healing magic. But could I heal his damaged organs? *No. No hesitation. I have to try. The light of his life is fading by the second.*

I placed my hands on the jagged chunk of metal. *Don't think about it. Just do it. Focus your mind and call out to the spirits.*

I yanked the metal from his body, clapped a hand over the wound, and summoned healing magic. "Spirits! Please!"

Warm blood gushed from his side. I did my best to hold back the deluge, praying with all my heart. Pale light flowed from my hand to fill the emptiness left by the escaping blood—but it wasn't enough. He was losing life energy

faster than I could replenish it. At this rate, he didn't have long to live.

It's a losing battle.

But as those words crossed my mind, something strange happened: his life energy rekindled. It overflowed from within him, as if his body was reflecting and magnifying my magic.

"What is this?" I murmured.

Healing power far stronger than mine closed his wound and stopped the bleeding. As I knelt there, trying to comprehend what had happened, his eyelids twitched.

"Ngh..."

"Oh, thank goodness!"

Tinia's face, tears streaming down her cheeks, filled my field of vision. *What's her problem? ...Oh, yeah. The crash.*

"Are you okay?" I could barely get the words out. Something felt off in my throat...no, in my windpipe. I coughed, then grimaced at the pain that shot through my body. Every inch of me hurt.

"Take a slow, deep breath. You were badly wounded."

"...Can't believe I survived."

Sucking in shallow breaths, I did my best to look around. The wreckage of our passenger car lay strewn around us. At least not having any kind of engine meant it hadn't exploded. Look on the bright side, huh?

"Can you get my stuff?"

"Yes, of course." Tinia carefully laid me on the ground and hurried off to find my backpack. There was a hole in the side. Hopefully, at least some of what I'd packed was salvageable.

"There's a white case inside... Yeah, that one. Take out the first aid nanomachine unit...that tube thing. Hand it over." Tina handed me a nanomachine injector. I pressed it against my stomach and pushed the injection

button. That was a relief, at least.

“Is this a canteen?” Tinia passed it to me. Ah, delicious water. As I drank, the nanomachines took effect, soothing the pain.

“Don’t push yourself,” said Tinia.

“Nah, I’m fine now. The nanomachines are working great.”

Tinia continued to fuss over me, but the medical nanotech was gloriously effective. While soothing my pain, it got to work repairing damaged organs and bones at an accelerated pace. The nanomachines required energy and materials, though, which they sourced from undamaged body parts and fat stores. If I didn’t feed them, I’d wind up thin and emaciated, with atrophied muscles. I rummaged through my backpack.

“What is that?” Tinia asked.

“A supplement,” I said, firing the second injector into my side. It contained a concentrate of the raw materials the nanomachines needed—basically, a nutritional supplement. Nanomachines seemed almost magical, but they couldn’t make something out of nothing. This supplement was recommended for heavier injuries.

I sat up and checked myself. I was covered in blood, especially on my right side. “Whoa. I can’t believe I survived that.” Gingerly, I touched the half-dried blood. *Ugh*. “Wait. Did you heal me with magic?”

“Yes, but...” Tinia’s face clouded. “When I cast the spell, the wound began to close on its own.”

“Really? That’s weird... Spooky.” I was still a regular human guy, right? Regenerating without the help of healing machines was the kind of thing you’d expect from a monster. Or could it be a side effect of the magic Tinia had cast?

“Maybe I’m really compatible with healing magic or something,” I suggested.

“Do you think so?”

“I mean, I dunno... Well, at least I’m alive. For now, let’s not worry about it.” After the nanomachines and the supplement, I was feeling way better. Whatever else was going on, I ought to focus on that. “Either way, thanks for

saving me. If it weren't for you, I'd be a goner."

"Oh, don't thank me! You shielded me from the crash." Tinia smiled, once again making her beautiful face a million times more stunning.

"Aren't you hurt at all? We fell from pretty high up. Don't tell me you came out completely unscathed."

"I'm perfectly fine. I found it strange, too, but I don't have so much as a scratch."

"Seriously? That's crazy lucky." Meanwhile, I'd gotten knocked out and stabbed in the side. "But even if you look okay, you could have a concussion or something. You'd better rest a little. Tell me right away if anything feels off, got it?" I stood and went through the rest of the contents of my backpack. My survival kit was still in order. Some of the food packets were torn; we'd have to eat those soon. Apart from that...

Crap.

"What is that?" Tinia asked.

"It would've been our ticket out of here." With a sigh, I set the distress beacon on the ground. Its fluorescent orange exterior was marred by a huge hole, right where the "on" button would be. You could see its inner workings through the cracked and broken exterior. It didn't look salvageable. "Maybe there's a chance it still works..." I poked at it, but I could tell it was hopeless. "Nope."

Tinia tried to cheer me up. "Let's stay strong."

She was right, of course. We were alive, and my crew should be able to find the area where we'd crashed. If they came to find us in the *Krishna*, we'd be out of the woods in no time.

"Yeah, okay. I don't know if we can get out of this massive forest on foot, but I'm sure my crew will be looking for us."

"Agreed. No doubt the hunters of the Grald Clan will be searching as well." There was that determined gaze I'd first seen on the pirate ship. Tinia had the makings of a leader. Her encouragement was surprisingly bracing, not that I

needed a ton of convincing to try to get out of this mess.

“First, let’s figure out our situation. My food supplies should last the two of us a good three days.”

“Is that space food?”

“Yeah. It’s what we call rations.”

I’d brought the same two types of rations I’d taken to Kormat IV: standard high-calorie Imperial Fleet rations, which were like strongly flavored sausages, and thick cakes from some kingdom or other. I chose them because eating them together made it a lot easier to avoid getting bored of one or the other. I made a note to eat the rations with damaged packaging first.

The survival kit and water bottles were fine. We could use the molecular disassembler and reconstitutor to build a rudimentary shelter. I was a little bit worried about whether the water would be enough for both of us, though.

While I thought things over, I noticed Tinia examining the rations.

“If you’re curious,” I said, “you can try a bite.”

“May I?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to eat the damaged ones soon anyway.” It was getting close to lunchtime, and I wanted some food in my belly. The supplement should’ve provided me with enough calories to keep me going for a while, but I still felt hungry. “Eating reduces stress in extreme situations,” I rationalized, “and we need to stay calm. Here. You just peel it open.”

I cut one of the damaged cake rations in half with a knife from my survival kit, then cut a slit in the packaging. I handed the undamaged half to Tinia and took the damaged half for myself. Some of it was too crushed to eat; I brushed the crumbs to the ground.

“It’s very sweet,” said Tinia.

“It’s high in calories, so you can get fat off it pretty easily.” She stopped eating and glared at me. “Um, but not in a survival situation, of course.” *C’mon, I was just trying to lighten the mood.* It wasn’t like she needed to worry about her weight. If anything, she could use a little meat on her bones.

“Okay, we’ve filled our bellies a little. Let’s get busy.”

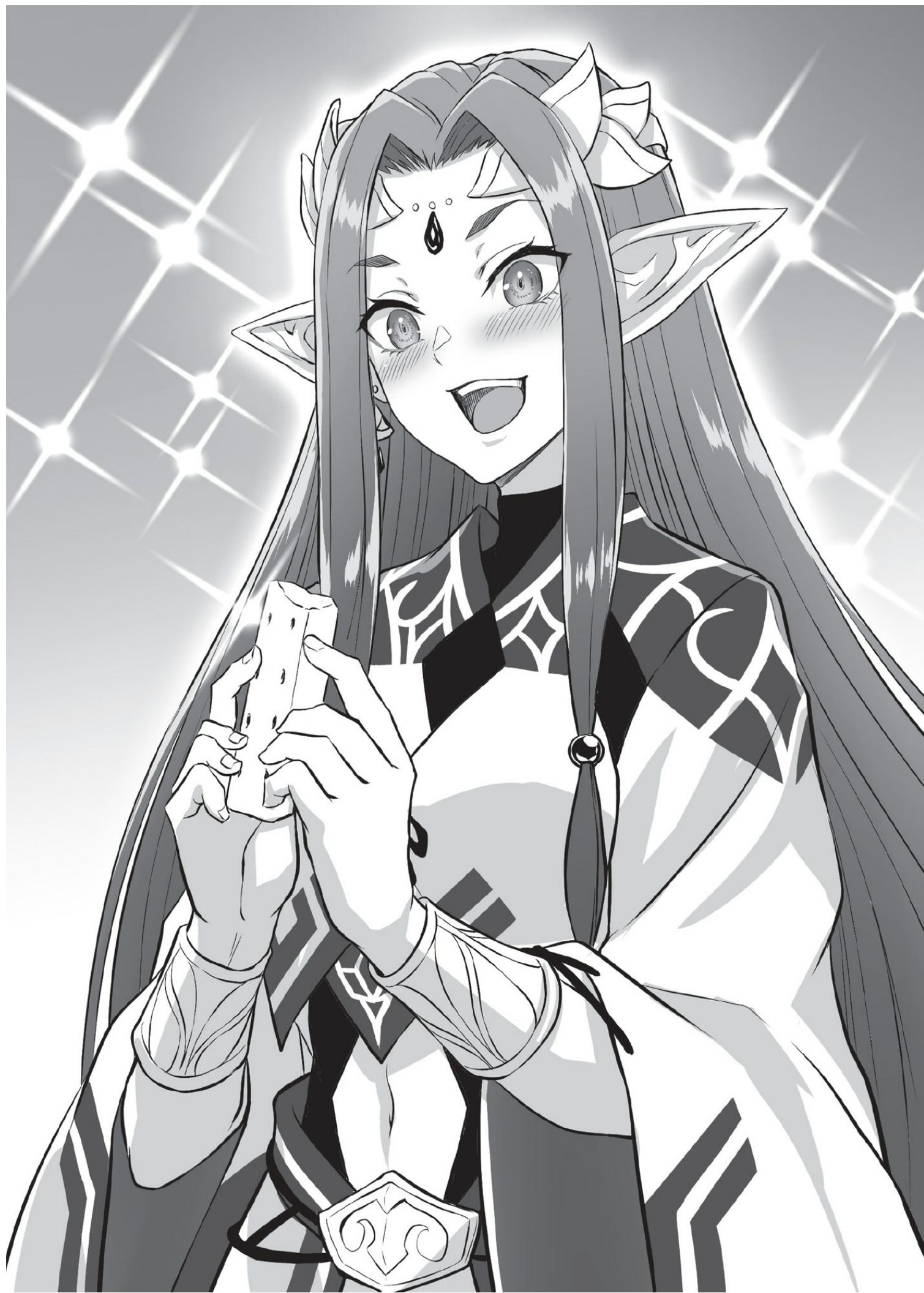
“Very well, but what shall we do?”

We looked around. We were surrounded by towering trees and thick undergrowth. It looked like the kind of wilderness where the struggle for survival never let up. We stood in the only pool of sunlight, created by our crash through the canopy.

“Your nature-loving clan might not approve of this, but...”

“What are you thinking?”

“We’re gonna cut through this forest,” I declared. I retrieved the molecular disassembler and reconstitutor from my survival kit, and whipped out one of my swords.



Chapter 6:

Comfy Survival in a Sci-Fi World

“HOW IN THE WORLD does this work?”

“No idea! I just know how to turn it on!”

We had a system going. I used my sword to cut through the underbrush and fell trees, then Tinia followed with the molecular disassembler and reconstitutor—the MDR for short—and absorbed the raw materials I’d just produced.

My confession earned me a skeptical look, which I answered with a shrug. Why did she need to know how it worked? She was operating it just fine.

The trees in this ancient forest might be hundreds or thousands of years old, for all I knew, but the swords of the Grakkan Empire nobility could cut through battleship plating and power armor. Wood was no problem. All we had to worry about was staying out of the way of the falling trunks.

“Sorry to make you complicit in the crime of deforestation,” I shouted over the sound of another tree crashing to the ground.

“Think nothing of it. We clear the trees around our villages, too, for safety. I’m surprised that someone from space would even think of this.”

“Yeah, well, I’m an experienced merc.” Truth was, all my ideas about wilderness survival came from movies, documentaries, and video games. It wouldn’t do any good to tell her that, though.

After about an hour, we’d managed to carve out a pretty large area. “Do you think we destroyed too much?” asked Tinia.

“Nah. The Krishna will need about this much space to land. Besides, a bald spot in the forest will make us easier to find from the air.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“You bet. Now let’s build a shelter before the sun sets.”

I took the MDR from Tinia and checked how much material we'd collected. We had a pretty good amount stored up. From what little I understood, everything Tinia had gathered was stored inside the device. How'd it all fit in there? Part of me was afraid of the explosion that might occur if the MDR somehow broke.

Tinia peered over my shoulder. "This device can construct an emergency shelter, too?"

"That's the idea." I checked the manual. You had to pick out a template, and then you pointed the MDR at the ground, and configured it with the push of a button. Talk about a handy gadget!

I pushed the activation button. In the blink of an eye, a dome of dark, carbon-like material appeared on the forest floor. It even had windows made of some kind of transparent resin.

"It's more convenient than magic, isn't it?" said Tinia thoughtfully.

"They say sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." I looked the shelter over. Windows, but no door. "I guess some parts have to be made separately. It'd be too much to expect the whole thing to appear in one piece."

I dialed up a door, then some simple pieces of furniture: a table, chairs, and two beds. The beds were just cots, synthetic cloth stretched over collapsible frames. They kind of just looked like a couple of beach chairs.

Tinia was thrilled. "It can make anything out of thin air! The technology of the outer worlds truly is remarkable."

"It has its limits, but it *is* pretty convenient." I generated thermal sheets for the cots. They were pretty thin, but surely they'd be better than nothing. If it came to it, we could always huddle under the chameleon thermal mount. It was a little blood-stained, but the cloak was intact; it could still hold up under any temperature.

"You built our little camp in no time at all," said Tinia.

"Yeah. Now, I guess, we just have to wait..."

I didn't have the skills to repair the distress beacon, and I doubted the MDR was up to reproducing complex tech. If Tina and Wiska were here, they might have been able to fix the beacon, but, alas...

"Shall we try to send a smoke signal?"

"Oh, that's a good idea. Sending up smoke from the clearing should make us easy to find."

Fortunately, a simple shovel was absolutely within the MDR's capabilities. I dug a hole in the ground and filled it with wood and brush. "When we're ready," I said, "I can light the fire with my laser gun."

"Aren't we ready now?"

"I don't know how long I was unconscious, but it wasn't that long, was it? Our group's probably only just landed in Grald territory, and they won't be able to turn around to look for us right away. Whether or not the Grald Clan joins them, they'll need time to organize a search party."

"No, I imagine they'll get moving as quickly as possible. The forests here are dangerous at night. There are many nocturnal predators. Even experienced hunters shy away from the deep forest after sundown."

"In other words, they'll be thinking that even if we survived the crash, we'll be goners if we're lost here overnight."

"Very likely. They'll try to find us before night falls."

"So we should send up the smoke signal now, huh?" I fired my laser gun into the kindling. Flames licked the wood and smoke quickly began to wind towards the sky. "Whoa, that's a little much. Better back away."

"Agreed."

Smoke stung my eyes. Good thing I'd dug the pit so far from the shelter. Why a pit, you ask? Partly to keep the fire from spreading, and partly to make it easier to put out. When we wanted to put the fire out, all we'd need to do was throw dirt into the pit. It kept the wind off our fire, too.

"There. That leaves just one problem. Water."

"Water?"

“The canteen I brought can make clean water out of moisture in the air, but only about two liters a day. That’s barely enough for one person. We’ll have to either conserve our water or find a source—”

While I talked, Tinia muttered something to herself and held out a hand. In an instant, a dripping sphere of water appeared in her palm.

“...Magic is awesome.”

“I think the ‘molecular disassembler and reconstitutor’ you brought is rather more impressive.”

“Let’s just agree they’re both pretty handy to have on a camping trip.”

With that, our water problem was solved. My other big concerns were those much-discussed wild predators and the danger of running out of food if we were stranded for more than a few days. But there wasn’t much I could do about either of those issues at the moment. If help arrived soon, I wouldn’t need to do anything.

“Well, we’ve made camp. Now all we can do is wait.”

“I certainly hope someone sees the smoke signal.”

I made two camping chairs with the MDR, and we sat and watched the rising smoke. Hopefully it’d keep the bugs away. From here on out it was just a matter of time. I could only hope that time would be short.

As I watched the smoke, a thought struck me. “Oh, yeah. You saved my life, Tinia. Thanks again.”

Tinia looked at me with surprise. Was I being too forward?

“I mean, I ought to thank you properly now that things have calmed down a little. If you hadn’t healed me with your magic, I’d have died before I could activate the nanotech.”

“Oh, I see.” Tinia looked flustered. “But I was unscathed because you protected me in the crash. Why don’t we call it even? If anything, I still owe you for saving me from that pirate ship. And this accident befell you in my clan’s territory...”

“Hey, don’t take the blame for the crash! That wasn’t your fault.” In fact,

there was a microscopic chance that I was the cause. Okay, a pretty big chance. A huge chance. But that didn't make it *my fault*, did it? I mean, how was I supposed to know that the wings would break off a flying machine just because I was riding in it?

"Very well. We're even for the day, then. You saved me, then I saved you. A perfect balance, don't you think?"

"Sure, why not? Let's leave it at that."

"Good. Let's." Tinia gazed into my eyes and smiled. I felt like I was about to melt. All elves, male and female alike, were beautiful, and Tinia stood out even on an entire planet of them.

I tried to play it off lightly. "Stare all you want, I'm not hiding any better food."

Tinia covered her mouth and laughed delicately. "I'm quite excited to try the rations, I assure you."

I couldn't get over how classy she was. Right up there with Luciada, Chris, and Elma's mom. Meanwhile, Elma was a member of the elf nobility, and she was always lounging around in bed in undies and a sports bra, snacking and drinking beer. How'd she end up like that?

"Sorry," I said. "I can't help blushing when a beautiful woman stares at me."

"My, how smooth. How many girls have you made cry with those lines?"

"Just so you know, I'm not any kind of pickup artist. The women in my life are just people I happened to wind up working with, I didn't seduce them. But it really is true that I think you're beautiful."

It wasn't just her elegant features. Her eyes burned with willpower. They almost gleamed in the fading light.

"I'll accept the compliment graciously," she said.

"You do that." I sensed this was a good time to change the subject. "So if we hadn't crashed, where were you going to show us around in Grald territory?"

She rested a hand on her cheek and tilted her head toward me. "Why ask in these circumstances?"

“*Because* we’re in these circumstances. Gotta distract ourselves with a little chitchat.”

We’d done everything that we could. The rest was up to fate. I could think of worse ways to spend the time than talking to a pretty girl.

While we kept the fire going, Tinia described the Grald Clan villages and temples we might have visited if not for the crash. We talked for a good few hours before the sun began to sink below the treeline. “Guess that’s it for our smoke signal,” I said.

“Indeed.”

Just for something to do, I’d gone into the forest and collected more firewood. It got a lot harder to see a smoke signal at night.

“If you’re right, someone should find us soon.” I looked up at the night sky. “No sign of help yet, though, huh?”

“I doubt they’d simply abandon us...”

“Nah. There’s no way they’d do that.”

“Agreed. It would ruin the Grald Clan’s reputation if we lost a guest. I simply can’t imagine them giving up on the search while the other clans were watching.”

“Forget the other clans—my crew would be pissed as hell.”

Mimi and the twins were tough enough, but Elma and Mei were downright dangerous when angered. I doubted they’d hop into the *Krishna* or the *Black Lotus* and start laying waste, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they decided to “deal with” anyone who blocked the search, in a way those elves wouldn’t forget.

As I watched the sky turn from red-orange to deep blue, I noticed a flash of light. “Huh?”

“Do you see something?”

“Maybe, but it’s not a rescue craft. It looks like it’s in orbit...or beyond.”

I strained my eyes to stare at the night sky. There were repeated flashes of

light. Laser fire striking a ship? That light pattern was more than familiar to me by now.

Tinia must've seen the same thing, because she said, "Oh, now it's flashing." I couldn't be certain, but those lights sure seemed to suggest a dogfight in space, and it was awfully close to Leafil IV.

As we watched, long tails of light began to dart through the night sky. "A meteor shower?" Tinia wondered.

"Nah. I think we're watching a destroyed ship fall to the planet as debris."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Most of it should burn up as it enters the atmosphere, but a few large chunks might reach the ground. You'd have to be seriously unlucky to get hit by one, though..."

...Aw, crap. I'd better look out above. Not that there was much I could do if the hull of a ship fell on us.

"Anyway, that looks like a big battle," I said. "What's going on? Do you think they're fighting the star system army?" I thought it was likely. A star system's army was generally funded by the local nobility and other bigwigs, and its size and reach depended on how deep their purses were. But such armies were almost always capable of taking on pirates. Even if a local army had to depend on outmoded ships sold off by the Imperial Fleet, it would still outclass the illegally modded private cruisers that made up most pirate crews.

Tinia watched the night sky, troubled. "Do you think everything's okay?"

Frankly, I didn't. If we could see the battle from planetside with the naked eye, it was way too close for comfort. At any moment, the enemy ships could close in for another drop raid.

"I don't know," I told her, "but our hands are tied down here." All we could do was hope for the quality, equipment, and training of the Leafil System army to win the day. But if we were watching a skirmish with pirates that could hold their own against a star system army... "Your people might be up against Red Flag."

“What’s that?”

“Big-name space pirates. Most pirate fleets max out at ten ships, tops, but there are a few large-scale gangs of hundreds, even thousands of ships. They build bases across the star systems and conduct coordinated raids. Red Flag is one of those big names.”

Red Flag was the only fleet I could think of with a wide enough circle of influence to include the Leafil System. Even the Imperial Fleet had trouble with them. Those large-scale operations could dodge the Empire indefinitely by spreading out their forces and hiding in backwater systems, making it nigh-impossible to eliminate them entirely. Space is vast, y’know.

“Why would such marauders come to Theta...?”

“I’m no pirate, but I hear elven slaves sell for a pretty penny.” Elves were strong, beautiful, and long-lived. To garbage people, that just made them desirable toys. Certain specialty buyers on the black market prized them for their psionic powers and unique genetic characteristics.

“Slavery?!”

“It’s how pirates are. That’s why, no matter how much they beg for their lives, I kill them without mercy.”

The first time you saw people “processed” into slavery, you lost any ounce of mercy for traffickers. Even with the Empire’s advanced medical technology, less than a third of the victims rescued from that brutal system were able to return to normal lives.

Tinia shivered as she stared at the stars. “It’s frightening out there.”

“I feel like people who live on planets and people out in space have different mindsets... It’s probably environment as much as anything else that gets you people like pirates.”

I still couldn’t figure out how space piracy worked. Somehow, no matter how many pirates were hunted down, it never seemed to make a dent in their numbers. As long as they were human, they had to be born somewhere before they grew up to do horrible space crimes. But where, and how? It was weird to talk about them like they were wild animals, but still, it was weird... It felt like

they just spawned out of nowhere, like enemies in a video game.

“What about you, Sir Hiro? What manner of man are you?”

“Me? I... Well, I may not be totally normal.” There was no way I could explain myself in a way that would make sense to Tinia. Hell, it didn’t make sense to me. I’d awakened in the universe of my favorite video game, in the pilot’s seat of my favorite virtual ship. Then things had gotten *really* weird. “But I think you and I are on the same page on one thing: piracy is unforgivable. That’s why I go after them.”

“I’m sorry. It must be hard to live amid such brutality.”

“Don’t worry about it. There are all kinds of people out in space, you know, not just pirates. There might be people out there who’d be scary to you, but that’s true everywhere, right? No matter where you go or what culture you’re dealing with, you’ll find good guys and bad guys. Except for pirates. They’re all bad.”

Weren’t they? I couldn’t picture a good pirate. Maybe there were some out there, but I wasn’t about to waste my time digging for them. Was that hypocritical? A double standard? Sure, whatever, but it’d be stupid to risk myself and my crew to give pirates a second chance.

“Anyway, this looks bad. Maybe we should put out the fire—damn!”

Just as I was about to shovel dirt on our fire, a shooting star—no, a massive fireball—ripped through the eastern sky, flying westward. Theta’s biggest port was in that direction. I couldn’t say for sure, but that fireball was most likely a pirate ship coming in for a drop raid.

A moment later, however, a swarm of glowing red streaks flew after the fireball. Tinia and I both cried out as the sky lit up. It could only have been anti-spacecraft fire from the *Black Lotus*’s twelve laser cannons.

More fireballs flew westward, but another round of laser cannon pursued each one.

“What was that?” said Tinia.

“If I’m right, it’s good news. My ship’s trying to intercept the pirates before

they can land—”

Bwoooooom!

An explosion shook the sky. Even from where we stood, a long, long way from the port, we could hear the thunderous sound. Tinia yelped.

“Seriously?” I said. “She fired an EML inside the atmosphere?”

None of the fire passed directly overhead, so it was hard to judge the trajectory, but the only thing on board the *Black Lotus* that’d make a noise like that was the EML mounted on the ship’s bow. If it scored a direct hit, an EML cannon could destroy even Imperial Fleet ships with a single blow. I shuddered to think what it might do within a planetary atmosphere. The shockwave alone could tear down buildings, and probably smaller pirate ships, too. It ought to be even stronger in an atmosphere than in outer space, besides...

“She’s going wild up there,” I muttered.

“Er...is everything all right?”

“Uh... Maybe? Gotta trust Mei, I guess.” I tried to imagine the cost of repairing everything an EML could conceivably demolish... That Maidroid was going to give me an ulcer. “All we can do is pray none of those pirates manage to land and find us. We’d better put out the fire and hole up in our shelter.”

“Understood.” Tinia murmured something to herself and the fire went out with a *fwoosh*. We were plunged into darkness, but a glowing light appeared in her hand.

“Magic sure is convenient.”

“Do you think so?” Tinia led the way to the shelter. “Would you like to try learning some?”

“You think I can?” The chieftains had acted like I had latent talent or energy or some damn thing. Maybe it was time to figure out if I could pick up magic after all.

As the sounds of battle echoed in the distance, Tinia and I faced each other across the small light source she’d created with her magic. “We should discuss

what to do tomorrow,” I said. “No help came for us today, and I don’t know when we can expect it.”

“Indeed. If worse comes to worst, we may need to consider crossing the forest on foot.”

I didn’t like that idea at all, but Tinia was right: we had to consider the worst-case scenario. That said, with my terminal offline, we didn’t have any kind of map. We couldn’t just wander around the woods without a plan; in an untouched forest like this, there wouldn’t be so much as a hiking trail. I didn’t like the sound of those dangerous animals everyone kept mentioning, and there’d be poisonous bugs and other pests besides.

“I still think our chances are better if we wait here for rescue,” I said.

“Well, yes. It would be very dangerous to venture into the forest. However, if those pirates continue to attack, our rescue may be delayed for some time.”

“Dammit, you’re right. My crew knows we have food and water, after all... That’s assuming they think we’re alive.”

“Exactly. You brought the necessities of survival, and I have my magic.”

“By now, the rescue teams ought to know that. Even so, my crew will want to find me. Even if they couldn’t make it today, they’ll be here tomorrow or the day after.”

“You trust them a lot, don’t you?”

“If it was me, and one of them was lost out here, I’d do anything to get them back. I’m pretty sure they’ll do the same for me.” My crew might let an elf rescue team take the lead for the first day, out of respect for the locals, but when the elves came back empty-handed or got too busy dealing with pirates, the girls would leap into action, come hell or high water. “We should be okay if help comes soon, but just in case we have to hike out of here, we’d better stretch our rations.”

“Fair enough. We can forage tomorrow to make our food supply last longer.”

“Good idea. But I don’t know what stuff on Leafil IV—er, Theta—is safe to eat.”

“Leave that to me. I have some woodcraft, and I often gather bounty from the forest.”

“That’ll be a big help. Okay, tomorrow you take the lead. I can guard you and carry our stuff.”

I was a little worried about leaving our campsite unguarded, but splitting up would be an even worse idea. If one of us got lost or injured while we were separated, it’d doom us both.

“That battle’s been going on for a long time,” I muttered. Through the windows of our shelter, the *Black Lotus*’s fire continued to scorch the night sky. It had to be a Red Flag mass drop raid. I didn’t know how many ships the pirates had to throw at the Leafil System, but surely they couldn’t wipe out the entire local army and turn the star system into a pirate base...

“Well, no use worrying about it,” I decided. “Let’s eat and get some sleep. We should take turns keeping watch.”

“Indeed. Better safe than sorry, as they say.”

“It’s easier to take first shift, isn’t it? Dibs on second shift.”

“No, you were badly injured. I’ll just take a quick nap.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m hale and hearty.”

After much back-and-forth, I finally convinced Tinia to let me sleep first. Damn, she was stubborn once she put her mind to something.

The sounds of battle never let up, making it difficult to sleep. When my terminal alarm woke me, I was surprised to find Tinia gazing at me. I pretended not to notice, and we switched places. Tinia had trouble getting to sleep, too, but eventually her breathing slowed. She must’ve been exhausted. I sat up until morning, watching for danger.

“Nnh...?”

“Morning,” I greeted Tinia. Her usually determined eyes were bleary, making her look uncharacteristically innocent. Her messy bedhead only added to the cuteness.

“Good morning... Yeek!” Tinia screamed and jumped out of bed, apparently surprised to see a man beside her first thing in the morning. I understood her reaction, but it hurt a little anyway.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said, raising my hands in surrender before she could aim a blast of offensive magic at my head. I had no idea what kind of spells she could use, but I knew she was better at magic than Elma.

“Oh! Er...that’s not... Don’t look at me!” Tinia hid her face in her hands. She was more flustered than I expected. She probably had to keep up a strong front all the time as the chieftain’s daughter—was it hard for her? Maybe early morning was the only alone time she usually had.

“Okay, okay. Why don’t I step out and stretch a little while you collect yourself?”

Hands still raised in surrender, I ducked out of the shelter. Mimi and Elma didn’t mind if I saw them defenseless and drooling in their sleep, but it seemed Tinia was different. More of that high-bred elegance, I guessed. If we had to spend another night together, maybe we ought to build a second shelter for privacy? No, too dangerous. Nothing had disturbed us this time, but if some kind of monster attacked, we’d want to be together. Tinia would just have to get used to close quarters.

While I pondered our options, a dejected Tinia emerged from the shelter. “I’m sorry for the unsightly state you saw me in.”

“I didn’t notice anything unsightly, but if you say so... Apology accepted?”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Let’s have breakfast.”

We cracked open some Imperial Fleet combat rations. The food was salty, but that made it perfect for hot, humid conditions where you’d expect to sweat a lot.

“This flavor is unusual, but tasty,” Tinia decided.

“Yeah, it’s surprisingly not bad. It gets monotonous day after day, though.”

“That’s true of any food. Let’s try to get out of here before that happens.”

“Damn right,” I agreed, biting into a salty sausage. How did elves replenish their electrolytes while hunting in the forest? Hopefully, Tinia knew some kind of elven wisdom that could help us out.

After breakfast, I put some of the firewood I’d cut yesterday into the fire pit and ignited it with a laser. If we got lost while searching for grub, we’d be able to find our way back by the smoke signal. To make extra sure, I planned to carve symbols into the trees as we went. Winding up stranded from the place where we’d been stranded would be no joke.

“Let’s take it slow,” I said. “I have no idea what to expect out here.”

Tinia nodded. “Even experienced hunters rarely venture this deep into the forest.”

I hoisted a small knapsack I’d made with the MDR. It contained two meals’ worth of rations, the moisture-absorbing canteen, backup energy packs, and the MDR itself. Tinia carried another two meals of rations. I was armed with my swords and laser gun, while she had the knife from the survival kit. The goal was to carry back food, so we traveled light.

“The undergrowth here is insane,” I muttered as I cut through the brush with my sword. Progress was slow. I marked the trees as I’d planned, but we’d probably be able to find our way back just by following the path I was slashing through the vegetation.

“This is untouched primeval forest... Oh, there’s something good!” Tinia stopped and pointed at what looked to me like a nondescript vine climbing a tree.

“Wow, already?”

“That’s kokiri vine. Look.”

I followed the direction she was pointing and saw some kind of small gourd, barely bigger than the size of my fist. “Oh, fruit.”

“Kokiri fruit. It’s sweet and full of moisture.”

“Okay, let’s gather some.”

“Leave it to me.” Tinia murmured something, and the kokiri fruit fell right off

the tree.

“Magic sure is convenient.”

“It isn’t all-powerful, but this is a simple enough spell. Let’s gather some more.”

“Yeah. We shouldn’t take everything, but a few more wouldn’t hurt.” Tinia blinked at me in astonishment. “Did I say something weird?”

“No, I just didn’t expect an outsider to say such a thing. Forgive me for my assumption, but I thought you’d suggest we harvest them all.”

“Yeah, some people might do that. But if we take them all, there won’t be any left to drop seeds. Other people may never come this deep into the forest, but we should have manners. And...gratitude toward the forest, I guess?”

“You sound like an elf. How strange you are, Sir Hiro.” Tinia laughed and waved a hand, causing more fruit to fall. It was fun to catch. I wondered what it tasted like.

“All right! We’re off to a good start.”

“Indeed. Let’s what else we can find.”

We continued walking until Tinia stopped once more. The undergrowth wasn’t as thick here; what had she found this time?

“You haven’t brought any digging implements, have you, Sir Hiro?”

“Nah, I left the shovel back at the campsite. Is there something here?”

“Yes. See this vine? The roots are edible.”

The vine Tinia pointed out was thinner and more delicate than the kokiri vine. Heart-shaped leaves sprouted from it where it wound around other plants.

I chuckled. “That’s where this bad boy comes in.” I took the MDR out of my backpack and adjusted the settings. During guard duty the night before, I’d gotten bored enough to read through the manual. It turned out it was possible to narrow the focus of disassembly. I pointed the MDR at the soil.

“Will that not ‘disassemble’ the jijo as well?” said Tinia.

“Jijo...? Oh, the vine. No, I think I can set it to only affect the dirt. Check this

out.” I fired the MDR at the ground. The earth around the vine immediately turned brittle. Holes appeared, as if it were collapsing bit by bit. It was an odd sight. “Now we should be able to pull the vine right out.”

“Remarkable,” said Tinia. “Our potato-diggers wield earth magic in just this way. The method is different, but the result is the same.” Tinia yanked on the vine, which slid out of the ground easily, revealing a long tuber. It looked like a wild yam, not that I’d ever gone digging for yams back on Earth. “That was certainly easy,” said Tinia.

“That’s edible? How do you eat it?”

“Once we wash off the dirt, it can be eaten raw. Jijo are tastier grilled or steamed, though.”

“I see.” Like yams, then.

Tinia cut the tuber free and buried the rest of the plant back in the ground. She washed the tuber with her water magic, broke it in half, and put it in her knapsack.

“Did you replant the vine so it can be harvested again?”

“Yes, that’s one reason. But we survive because the forest shares its blessings with us, so we should protect it in return.”

As we continued our walk, Tinia told me more about how the Grald Clan lived with the forest and harvested food. From time to time, she stopped to collect leaves and herbs that she said were good for cooking. “I can’t believe how much you’ve found.”

“Yes. We ought to have plenty for dinner tonight.”

We’d managed to find more kokiri fruit, too. We munched on a couple of pieces while we took a rest from hiking. Cut open, kokiri looked less like a gourd and more like a small melon. The edible part was yellow-white. Wait, was a gourd a type of melon? Or was it the other way around? Whatever. This was some kind of alien plant, anyway, so it wasn’t like it was genetically related to anything from my world.

“This kokiri stuff is good,” I said to Tinia. “Will it keep?”

“Well, not ones that are this ripe. They’ll only last a week at most. If the unripe fruit are pickled with seasonings, however, they can last half a year. We also make jam by boiling them down with sugar or gi honey, and that lasts even longer.”

“Cool. Shame the fruit itself doesn’t hold up long.” I bit into another piece. It had a noticeably grassy flavor, but it was sweet. It was surprisingly good for wild fruit that presumably hadn’t been bred for flavor.

“Why’s that?”

“I was just hoping I could take some back onto my ship. I guess we wouldn’t be able to get it past quarantine anyway, though.” Carelessly taking alien fruit to other planets could lead to ecological disaster. In addition to guarding against viruses and bacteria, just about every planet in the Empire was extremely sensitive about exporting plants and animals. Planets with unique species had customs and quarantine stations on the lookout for smugglers. There were also laws protecting trade crops from genetic theft. Long story short, even if I could get past the short shelf life, I probably wouldn’t be able to take kokiri fruit off Theta.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you there,” said Tinia. “But I understand the Minpha and Rosé Clans use Imperial technology to cultivate genetically modified kokiri. The Grald Clan only practices traditional selective breeding.”

“Do you breed these?”

“Yes. We grow bigger, sweeter kokiri in our orchards. Though I happen to like the wild ones, too.”

“Now that’s interesting. You’ll have to tell me all about it later.”

“Of course. We have plenty of time, after all.”

After kokiri fruit and a short break, we continued through the forest. Tinia found plenty of edible plants and we collected just enough for the two of us. There wasn’t any point to gathering too much and letting it rot. Our knapsacks were starting to get heavy.

“Y’know,” I said, “I’m surprised we haven’t run into any of those dangerous animals. Maybe they’re not looking for trouble.”

“Most likely not. Wild animals survive by being cautious; a small injury can lead to an untimely death for them. Unless they’re very hungry, they’ll only attack if we intrude on their territory or approach their offspring.”

“I guess it’s best for us to keep our distance. I wouldn’t mind some meat, but I don’t know how to hunt and butcher game, and the water...” I knew you needed water to clean a freshly killed animal and keep it cool. Hunter-gatherers sometimes threw game into lakes or ponds.

“I can provide water with my magic, and I’m skilled at butchery.”

“Even though you’re not a hunter?”

“If a hunt is very successful, the hunters will require help to butcher the meat and skin the hides.”

“I see.” It made total sense that Tinia could butcher game. I hoped she didn’t wonder how I, a guy from space, knew anything at all about it, even if I didn’t know much. Better change the subject. “I wonder what Mimi and the others are up to. Hope they’re safe.”

“By now they’re surely safe in Grald territory. I’m more concerned about that pirate attack...”

“It sounded like the battle had stopped by the time I woke up last night. Since there hasn’t been any sign of trouble since, I think we can safely assume the good guys won.”

Even a big-name pirate fleet couldn’t hope to wipe out an entire star system army. Even if they did, there was no way they’d be able to hold the system. Neighboring systems and the Imperial Fleet would intervene, and eventually the pirates would face the full force of the Grakkan Empire.

As far as I could tell, no fighting had resumed. That was proof enough for me that the star system fleet had won. Whether my crew, the *Krishna*, and the *Black Lotus* were safe was another matter. The destruction of the *Black Lotus* would’ve caused an explosion big enough to be heard around the planet, though, so I told myself it was fine.

What's that? Pirates could've boarded the *Black Lotus* and taken control? Nah. Attacking it in battle was one thing, but sending forces on board would be suicide. They'd be facing military-grade battle bots *and* Mei. Mei and the bots would give a fully armed, fully trained Imperial regiment a run for its money.

"I hope you're right," Tinia said as we continued through the forest.

Just then, we saw light up ahead. "What's that?" I asked.

"A river or spring, perhaps?"

"It doesn't look like a reflection. More like...a glow." I cut through the brush. "What the hell?"

"This..."

I couldn't wrap my head around what I was looking at. Lying on the ground was a football-shaped object, almost too big to wrap my arms around. It shone with some kind of fluorescent green light. Was the thing radioactive? Cherenkov radiation was blue, not green, right?

I turned to Tinia. "Seriously, what is it? Some kind of special Thetan fruit? What makes it glow?"

"I'm not sure... Could it be?" Tinia was visibly flustered. Was it bad news?

Afraid to touch it with my bare hands, I picked up a stick and prodded it. "Seems pretty hard."

"P-poking it with a stick, of all things...!"

"Should I not do that? Is it gonna explode or something?"

"I certainly doubt that, but..." Tinia sighed. "It ought to be safe to touch."

"Oh, really? Then here goes." I squatted down in front of the mysterious object and tapped it. It felt like a tree, or a big seed. Definitely some kind of plant life. "Hey, is it edible?"

"Eating it would be an outrage!" Tinia cried. As if in protest, the mysterious object shone more brightly.

"Whoa!" I backed away and took Tinia by the hand. I didn't like this thing at all. "Are you sure it's not dangerous? I feel like we should get out of here and

forget we ever saw it.”

“Abandoning it would be equally outrageous!” The object began flashing. Was it controlling Tinia somehow? The whole situation was seriously suspicious.

“Come on, Tinia. Just tell me what it is.”

“I’ve never seen one before, so I can’t be certain...but I believe it’s the seed of the sacred tree.”

“Seed of the sacred tree,” I repeated flatly. The thing brightened again, like it was agreeing with us. *Annoying*. “Hey, didn’t the first pirate raid damage the sacred tree?” I didn’t know exactly what that tree was, but it was clearly an object of elven worship, or something like that.

“Yes. As we speak, the guardians of the tree and the tree maidens are working desperately to keep it alive. I can’t believe it produced a new seed, though.” Tinia gazed timidly at the glowing seed. Did the tree only reproduce when it was in danger of dying?

“Well, if we can’t leave it here, I guess we have to take it back to the campsite. We can use it as a light.”

“Use the sacred tree seed as a light?” Tinia looked at me like I was insane. Hey, I wasn’t an elf. I didn’t have any special reverence for the thing. It was nice that it was important to her, but I only cared that it was harmless and kinda convenient.

“Is it that important?” I said.

“But of course,” Tinia looked at me with utmost sincerity. “The sacred tree is our home and our hope. It is always with us. We elves are born and prosper under its blessing...”

I got the feeling that this sermon could go on for a while. I was going to have to get rude and cut her off. “Okay, got it. Should we take the seed back with us?”

“Er, very well, but carefully, please. *Very* carefully. Actually, I should—”

“Nah, I’ll carry it. You’re definitely too nervous around this thing.”

I snatched up the big seed and tossed it into my knapsack. It flashed in protest

at my rough treatment, but I ignored it. Pretty smart for a plant, though. *I bet I could sell it for a bundle out in space... Not that I'd do something like that, of course.*

Chapter 7:

Rescue

“WHAT DO WE DO NOW?” Tinia asked.

“I dunno... Just put it down somewhere, I guess?”

We’d headed straight back to camp. Tinia was so worked up about the sacred tree seed that I was afraid to keep wandering around in the wilderness with her.

“For now, let’s just calm down,” I warned her. “You’re really on edge. Remember, we’re in a survival situation here.”

“Y-you’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just so stunned...”

I set the seed down on the ground. It lay there, still looking like a football. How did they make those things stand upright at football games? Some kind of prop? I’d never played football or rugby.

“Anyway, I’m hungry. How about we dine on our harvest?”

“Yes, very well. Cooking may be a good way to calm down. But...”

“But?”

“While I did manage to collect herbs, I don’t have any salt. I fear our meal will be rather bland.”

“I already have a solution for that,” I replied, taking the MDR out of my backpack. I tapped out a new configuration on the holo-display. A small bag appeared on the ground.

“What is this?” Tinia asked.

“A salt pack. The MDR can refine minerals out of the soil.”

Tinia took a pinch of salt out of the bag and touched it to her tongue. “Real salt. What a remarkable device.”

I had to agree. The MDR sure made life in the woods a whole lot easier. It had

turned out to be one of the most important items in my survival kit, a thousand times more helpful than the stupid broken distress beacon. That beacon was nothing but a paperweight now.

“Shall we get right to cooking? Not that I can make anything especially elaborate...”

“I can’t blame you for that.”

I hadn’t packed any cookware. Even if we could build a stone oven or something, it wouldn’t be much use without pots and pans, and the soil didn’t contain enough metal for the MDR to make anything along those lines. I thought of disassembling the useless beacon and crafting something out of it, but I wanted to keep it in one piece so I could file a complaint with the manufacturer. Messing with the aircraft car probably wasn’t a good idea, either. Well, we could make do.

“What do you say to a steamed dish?” said Tinia. “I can make something from jijo, mokori mushrooms, herbs, and salt.”

“Leave the shroom slicing to me.”

The MDR was able to make a kitchen knife out of the same carbon-like material as the shelter. I started work prepping the mushrooms Tinia had found in the woods. They were brown and shaped like king trumpet mushrooms, with a strong umami fragrance. Before slicing them, I soaked them in salt water to get rid of bugs. Tinia assured me that cooking would render any pests or microbes harmless, but the thought of eating bugs still grossed me out.

“You really can cook,” Tinia said, impressed, as I sliced the mokori mushrooms and peeled the jijo.

“Not as well as I’d like. You don’t get many opportunities to cook in space. Just about anyone can slice mushrooms and peel potatoes.”

“You hold a cooking knife with as much confidence as a sword. I’m sure that, were you inclined, you could give up mercenary work and make a living as a chef.”

She was teasing me, but I was flattered anyway. “This is barely a step above bachelor cooking. Really, I’m a glorified amateur. Maybe I could get better with

practice, but I'll never be great."

"So you say. But isn't it fun to cook together like this? The men of the Grald Clan seldom cook."

"Yeah, guys are like that in a lot of places..."

While we talked, we finished prep. Working as a pair made cooking go way faster.

I gestured at my pile of chopped mushrooms and vegetables. "What do we do with this?"

"Wrap it in these leaves and steam it."

We arranged chopped jijo, mokori mushrooms, kokiri pulp, and other ingredients on large leaves similar to banana leaves, added herbs and salt, and wrapped them. We placed the wraps on stones heated by the fire, then added more layers of leaves on top to steam them.

"I can't wait to see how they come out," I said.

"It will take some time for them to steam."

Tinia carefully adjusted the fire around the packets using branches from the camp, then stood and wiped her brow. Cooking sure was harder without the right equipment. Making just one dish wiped us out. I gave thanks for the blessings of civilization...or for the blessings of cookware, at least.

After cleaning up our food prep area, I gave the glowing seed another look. "What do we do about this thing?" Tinia insisted it was the seed of the elves' sacred tree, but what had it been doing lying around in the middle of nowhere? It made no sense to me. "Whatever it is, we'd better take it back with us, huh? What a headache. If it was up to me, I'd chuck it in the forest and forget about it..."

"It would be an outrage to cast it away!" Tinia immediately flew into a panic again. The seed flashed brightly.

"Okay, okay, I get it. I'm not gonna do that." I leaned over the seed. "What are you? Do you understand what we're saying?"

The seed flashed. It really did look like it was responding to us.

“How about this? Flash twice for yes, once for no. Got it?”

Flash, flash. Twice. *Hmm...*



“Are you the seed of the sacred tree?”

Flash, flash. Of course, maybe it was just answering everything with two flashes. I needed to test it with a question that would get a “no” answer.

“Are you lying and plotting to suck our blood?”

Flash. Just once. Okay, then...

“Sir Hiro! That was rather rude...”

“So what? It’s a seed. Heck, it’s not even a full-grown plant...” The absurdity of the argument hit me. “Whatever. Let’s keep asking questions.”

While we waited for our food to steam, we questioned the seed. From its answers, we pieced together a story. The pirate attack had set the sacred tree ablaze and shattered its trunk. Before dying, it had used its remaining power to expel its core or essence—something like that—to safety. We’d stumbled on that core by pure coincidence.

“Pretty big coincidence,” I said. “Did you make us fall out of the sky?”

One flash: a “no.” Could I trust it, though? On one hand, it seemed all too likely that those yin-whatever wings on our car had failed because of my crazy luck, nothing more. But what were the chances that we’d land within walking distance of this seed thing? Or that we’d stumble upon it while wandering around looking for food?

“Please, Sir Hiro. You can trust the seed.”

There went Tinia again, siding with the stupid seed. I had no proof that the thing was telling the truth—or flashing the truth, I guess—so of course I was still suspicious. Thinking it over, though, what proof could it provide? The fact that it could communicate at all was pretty strong evidence that it was what it claimed to be. Besides, it didn’t seem to be able to do anything on its own except glow. It couldn’t even move of its own volition. Maybe giving it the third degree was a little unproductive.

I gave in. “If you say so, Tinia.”

“Thank you. The food should be ready, so let’s have something to eat. They say people get grumpy when they’re hungry.”

“True enough.” Telling myself I was just hangry, I followed Tinia to lunch and left the weird glowing football behind.

Tinia peeled a packet open. “It looks like it’s steamed just right.”

“Whoa. Now that looks tasty.”

The jijo, mushrooms, and seasonings in each leaf packet had softened and melded, producing a delicious dish. We had separately steamed unripe kokiri fruit on the side, and Tinia had used her magic to freeze ripe kokiri and milberries—blackberry-like fruits about the size of ping-pong balls—for dessert.

“Delicious,” I moaned. “The jijo’s nice and fluffy, and steaming really brings out the kokiri shrooms’ umami flavor. The herbs smell amazing, and the salt is just right. You’re a great chef, Tinia.”

“Thank you very much. It’s been a while since I used traditional cooking methods, so I was a bit worried. I’m glad it came out well.”

“The steamed kokiri fruit tastes way better than I expected, too.”

“To produce larger, sweeter fruits in our orchards, we have to thin the trees regularly; I’ve tried making dishes like this before with the unripe fruit that we pick during that process.”

I still thought kokiri might be more like squash or gourds than fruit, so I’d expected the unripe fruits to taste something like zucchini. Even just steamed without seasoning, though, they were juicy and subtly sweet. They’d probably be even better with bonito flakes and a little soy sauce, like grilled eggplant.

“The frozen kokiri and milberries are really something, too.”

“These are the wild varieties, so they lack sweetness, but I agree they’re still flavorful.”

While we enjoyed our meal together, the big football started flashing again. Couldn’t it wait until we were done eating? “What is it?” I said. “Damn, you’re annoying. Even if you can’t make noise, you’re visually as loud as can be.”

“Er, Sir Hiro... That is an object of elven faith.”

“Does it matter? Whether you’re a cute little kid or a respectable grown-up, you need to be told when you’re being rude, right?”

Tinia groaned. “That’s difficult to refute, I suppose.” I didn’t want to be the kind of guy who goes around criticizing people left and right, but the thing got on my nerves. What was it upset about this time? Surely it didn’t care about missing lunch.

I walked over to it. “What’s the deal? You want to eat too?” It flashed twice in response. What the hell? How was I supposed to feed a plant? Couldn’t just it shove some roots in the ground and start sucking up nutrients or something? “Hey, Tinia. Do you have any idea what this thing eats? Does it just want water?”

Tinia thought carefully. “According to legend, heroes and maidens would offer it mana.”

“What’s mana? And how do you give it to a seed?”

“The legends don’t explain.” She looked as baffled as I was. If Tinia didn’t know what to do with the thing, there was no way I’d know.

Sorry, bud, but I’m going back to lunch.

“Thanks. That was a great meal.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

After we’d eaten and cleaned up, I decided to confront the seed face-to-face. Or face-to-football? I couldn’t tell which side was supposed to be the front.

“So you want food, too, huh?”

Two flashes. Interesting.

“What do you eat? Should I water you?”

One flash. It wasn’t thirsty.

“Surely you don’t eat food like we do. Do you eat mana?”

Flash, flash. This little guy really was on the ball. How did Imperial or galactic law deal with a life form like this? Would it be considered intelligent in the normal sense? I couldn’t guess.

After a lot of patient questioning, I wound up seated in one of the chairs from

the shelter, holding the seed in my lap like a little dog. This seemed to make it happy. Its glow settled into a slow, steady flicker. It looked like an appliance charging.

“Is that it?” I said.

Tinia shrugged. “It seems so.”

“This makes no sense to me.” At least it wasn’t much trouble. “Now that we’ve placated this thing, I guess all we can do is play the waiting game again.”

“I’m afraid so. There’s no point to running around without—” Tinia trailed off. Her long ears twitched. I stood, set the seed in the chair, and drew my laser gun. The seed flashed in protest again, but this wasn’t the time to babysit a vegetable.

“That sounds...” Before I could say the hum in the air sounded familiar, a black shadow passed overhead. “It’s the *Krishna*. Do they see us?”

The *Krishna* was close. The crew had probably spotted our smoke signal from afar, but they hadn’t found our campsite yet. We’d cleared a pretty large area, but maybe it didn’t stand out so much from above.

“It seems they haven’t seen us,” said Tinia.

“I bet they will if I do this.” I aimed my laser gun at the sky and fired.

Pow pow pow pow pow! Five rays of light shot into the sky. After a moment’s pause, I fired off five more. The *Krishna*’s sensors ought to pick up laser fire more easily than the smoke signal.

A minute later, the *Krishna* reappeared and slowly descended. Spaceships flying in a planetary atmosphere looked so odd. Thanks to their high-output thrusters, they could stop in midair and move in any direction, as if to say, “Aerodynamics? LOL, what’re those?” Still, the *Krishna* moved more sluggishly than it did in space. You couldn’t underestimate the power of gravity.

We didn’t have a landing pad, naturally, so the auto-docking function wouldn’t kick in. Even so, the *Krishna* made a perfect landing in our clearing. Who was behind the wheel? The precision suggested Mei, but it looked more like Elma’s piloting style to me.

While the *Krishna* landed, we splashed Tinia's magic-sourced water onto the bonfire and covered the embers in soil. Didn't want to start a forest fire, after all. *Take only pictures and leave only footprints, kids.*

As soon as the *Krishna* landed, the hatch opened. A shadow shot out like a speeding bullet and, with a heavy thud, it landed at my feet—no, it didn't just land, it outright crashed. I jumped and yelped in spite of myself.

"Master, Master, Master, Master, Master!"

"Mei—? Calm down! Are you glitching out?! Down, girl!"

Mei leapt up from her crash landing and pulled me into a hug with her full Maidroid strength. As much as I normally enjoyed being pressed against her lovely soft boobs, it hurt to get squeezed this hard.

"Apologies. I was distraught." Mei regained her cool in the blink of an eye, released me, then hugged me again—more gently this time. Much better. What made a Maidroid smell so good? It was an eternal mystery.

Behind Mei, the rest of the crew disembarked.

"She beat us!" Wiska complained.



“I don’t know how you planned to beat *that*,” said Tina wryly.

Elma chuckled. “As soon as the hatch opened, she turned into a blur.”

“I didn’t know Mei could get upset,” said Mimi.

“I am a machine intelligence with emotions. At times I become distraught.” Mei ran her hands expertly over my body with her usual expressionless face. I didn’t expect her to find anything by touch alone, so I was surprised when she said, “Traces of a puncture wound under the axillary region. Were you injured?”

“I can’t believe you noticed. When our aircar crashed, part of the frame—” But before I could finish talking, Mei had scooped me into her arms. She sprinted to the *Krishna*’s medical pod and threw me in. “But I’m fine now, so—”

Mei wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Nanomachine first aid should be considered only a temporary measure,” she intoned as she jacked into the pod, gazing at me through the transparent housing. “You require a thorough inspection.”

Uh, how come the pod was making sounds I’d never heard before? Had Mei hacked it to use it for purposes outside its scope? Was I going to survive this medical inspection?

“Please relax in there, Master,” Mei said from outside the pod. “I have necessary cleanup work to perform.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alarm bells were ringing in my head. This wasn’t the time to defy her. “Oh, and be nice to Tinia, okay? I’d be dead right now if it wasn’t for her.”

“Understood. Leave everything to me.”

I was left alone inside the pod. No time to ask how the pirate attack had shaken out, why my crew had shown up instead of an elf search party, or any of the millions of other questions on the tip of my tongue.

I started to feel sleepy. The pod was probably administering some kind of sedative. I hadn’t gotten much sleep in the forest...a nap sounded nice. I stopped resisting and closed my eyes. There was a lot to think about, but for now it was sleepy time.

When I woke up, Mei was staring down at me from outside the medical pod. Confirming that I was awake, she keyed in the code to open the lid.

“Morning, Mei.”

“Good morning, Master. Do you have any complaints? Dizziness, nausea, headache?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I swear.”

“That’s good. However, a fall such as the one you experienced can cause injuries that aren’t immediately obvious. As soon as possible, you should visit a medical facility.”

“Got it.” I sat up in the pod and put on the jacket Mei had removed when she forced me in. “So how’s everyone doing? Where are we?” The hole ripped in the side of the jacket was gone. Had Mei mended it for me? Nah, she’d probably just laid out one of my identical backup jackets.

“Currently, the *Krishna* is inside the *Black Lotus*, which is docked at the Leafil IV port facility.”

“Where’s the rest of the crew?”

“They are waiting for you in the lounge.”

I checked the time on my terminal. Not quite dinnertime yet, but I was feeling hungry. “I could stand to eat. Bath first, though.”

“Very good. I will join you.”

“You don’t have to. I mean, my injuries are healed, so there’s no need to be worried...” Mei looked disappointed, though, so I changed course. “But to hell with it. You wanna?”

“Yes.”

Fine by me. I owed her plenty for coming to save me, and it was rare for her to express a desire like that. We enjoyed a bath together in the *Black Lotus*’s comfortably large tub before making our way to the dining hall.

By the time we got there, the rest of the crew had finished eating and was

hanging out. Tinia was there, too, with the seed of the sacred tree in her lap.

Mimi jumped up. “Good morning!”

“Pretty late in the day for that.”

“Hey, we’re just glad you’re safe,” said Elma. “Tinia’s been telling us about your adventure.”

“Yeah? Sorry for making you guys worry.”

“Long as you’re back in one piece, it’s all good!”

“We really were scared for you. I’m so glad you’re all right.”

All my crewmates gathered around me, rejoicing over my safety. That alone made it worth surviving to come home...not that survival had been *too* difficult after the initial crash.

“Tinia really saved my life. Not only did she heal my wounds, she taught me how to survive in the forest, foraged for food, and, most of all, kept me sane.” I’d given some thought to how important mental state is in a survival situation. If you give in to despair, you might panic and freak out, or even give up entirely. And if you don’t have anyone to help get you out of a state like that, you’re as good as done for.

“Please.” Tinia smiled, stroking the seed in her lap. “Sir Hiro’s the one who saved me. Without him, I doubt I would have made it through the first night.”

I became aware that everyone else in the room was grinning at us. *Now, wait right there.* “I’m just gonna say this for Tinia’s sake, but nothing happened, got it? We helped each other through a tough situation—it wasn’t even for that long, and we were just doing our best to survive.”

“I didn’t say anything,” said Elma.

“I was just admiring how well you...keep each other’s spirits up,” said Mimi.

“Who cares if ya add one more? We got plenty of room.” Tina’s grin widened. Even Wiska was giving me a wicked smile.

“Gimme a break! What kind of bastard do you think I am? You think I’d pounce on a woman who’d just saved my life?”

“Really?”

“...Okay, Elma, when *you* say that, it really stings. You’re a special case, okay?”

“Oh, I’m special, am I?” Elma seemed genuinely flattered.

Mimi pouted and sidled closer to me. I patted her on the shoulder. *There, there. You’re special, too, Mimi.*

“You’re all so close,” Tinia noted.

“You betcha. We talk a lot of smack, but Hiro’s good to all of us, aren’tcha, hon?”

“Mei does so much for us, too.”

“The secret to gettin’ along ’round here is to share ’im fairly!”

What was I, a cake? “Um...any news on the pirates?”

Elma activated the dining hall’s holo-display. A news program came on covering recent events on Leafil IV. The display filled with the emblem of a red flag with a black skull on it.

“Red Flag,” I muttered.

“They haven’t made a statement claiming responsibility,” said Elma, “but the ships bore their insignia. They sent out a large force to distract the Leafil System military while a smaller force swooped down on Theta. It looks like they planned to destroy the port as a prelude to a full invasion.”

“But Mei was waiting with the *Black Lotus*,” I guessed, “and put a stop to that plan.”

“Pretty much. It was a hasty attack. They were probably trying to salvage their reputation after their last run-in with us.”

“The *Black Lotus* looks unarmed. Maybe they fell for the ruse and thought they could just overwhelm it with numbers.”

“Or else they didn’t know we were on Theta in the first place.”

As Elma and I talked, the screen changed. I saw some familiar faces, including the tribal chieftains. From what I could make out, the Leafil System army was dealing with a lot of criticism for letting a second attack slip through to the

mother planet. Military leaders argued that this was a far larger attack than normal and the minimal casualties were evidence that they'd been on high alert.

This time, the pirates had attempted a mass bombardment of Theta using an asteroid with an FTL drive attached to it. The army had been forced to focus on destroying the asteroid, leaving them unable to stop the drop raid... That was what the army said, anyway.

"That sounds familiar," I said. We'd defended the Sierra System against a suspiciously similar attack. Considering the damage an asteroid would do if it crashed into a planet, you had no other choice than to make stopping it your top priority.

"I hear pirates have their own communications network," Elma replied. "Maybe they share their little success stories."

"Check that out," said Tina as the news moved on to the next story. "Sounds like your crash got the Rosé Clan hella ticked off with the Grald Clan."

According to the news, the Rosé Clan had wanted to comb the forest as soon as Tina and I had gone missing, but the technology-averse Grald Clan had refused. Instead, the Grald Clan had sent out a search vehicle similar to the aircraft we'd flown in, but they'd backed off after finding evidence that the cause of the crash was mana overload. They didn't want to risk losing another craft the same way.

"Did the rest of you make it to the destination okay?"

"Right after your car fell, our wings started crackin', too," Tina said. "We didn't fall, but man, it sure didn't feel good."

"Engineers from the Minpha Clan investigated the car," Wiska added. "They were the ones who suggested grounding the search craft."

The clans had been putting another rescue team together when Red Flag attacked. Our rescue was delayed even further in the chaos. Finally, my crew—or rather, Mei specifically—got fed up and took things into their own hands. Shaking off attempts to restrain them, they lifted off in the *Krishna* and tracked us down.

I sighed. "In other words, we got tied up in red tape."

Tinia slumped over sadly. "On behalf of my people, I'm terribly sorry."

Wiska smiled wryly. "It must have hurt to think we abandoned you."

"Just think what might have happened if you hadn't brought that survival kit," said Mimi.

"That turned out to be keen judgment," Elma agreed. "Even if any normal observer would have thought you were insane."

"Just a whisper. I heard it in my ghost."

"Nah. You can just sense trouble 'cause you're always gettin' into it!"

"Knock it off with the logic." In all seriousness, I had to wonder if I was cursed. Maybe I ought to see an exorcist. Did this universe even have exorcists? The elves might be able to do that kind of thing...but when the problem was so pronounced, would that just be poking the bear?

"Is there anything left for us to do?"

"Yes, Master. The tribes have contacted us, asking for permission to visit tomorrow morning and apologize. I have yet to respond."

"Let them know we'll accept their apologies. Also, Tinia can stay on board for the day."

"Understood." Mei bowed. She'd calmed down a lot since she'd examined me from top to bottom in the bath.

"I guess it's only right for them to apologize," I mused. "After all, they invited us here as guests and then nearly killed us."

"But hon, you probably caused the accident..."

"Details, details. I'm not saying they could've predicted it, but they still put their guests in danger."

"This has gotta be rough for whatever poor chump is in charge... Lilium said the aircraft was totally safe before we took off an' everything."

"And then you got on board," Wiska sighed.

“Stop acting like it’s my fault! You can’t prove a thing!”

“Fair enough,” said Tinia with a grin. “It’s our fault too for not keeping you in line.”

“Anyway, it’s not about the crash,” I said. “Their response really sucked.”

Elma agreed. “Spending the night deep in that forest could have been a death sentence.”

“We’re lucky we didn’t get attacked by any dangerous animals.”

“They may have been frightened away from their territory by the crash and your construction activities. You cleared a sizable area, you know.”

“That could be it.” If someone destroyed a chunk of my home in minutes, I’d run for it, too, even if I was a big, ferocious forest creature. That had to be terrifying. “Still, I’m lucky Tinia fell with me. She saved my life. Gotta take the good with the bad, right?”

“That’s stretching it,” said Elma. “Even leaving the crash aside, the response was such a mess that we had to come save you ourselves. And that mess started with the Grald Clan’s stubbornness.”

She was as blunt as ever, and she didn’t soften her words in front of Tinia. Mei might have had the strongest reaction to the delayed rescue, but the rest of the crew was upset, too. Poor Tinia was practically curled up into a ball in shame.

I tried to lighten things a little. “But the investigation revealed the crash wasn’t their fault, right? It was—what did you guys call it?—a mana overload?”

“Yup,” said Tina. “And I bet they stress-test the heck outta anything that’s carryin’ people—I guarantee ya they’d know how much mana can go through those wings.”

“The Grald Clan has records of accidents similar to what we went through,” Wiska added. “The two back wings of our car were shattered, and the front two were full of cracks.”

“Huh. Well, it doesn’t sound like sabotage or anything. I can’t be held responsible for negligent passenging, right? Right?”

“Nah, no way. They can’t expect folks like us to know squat about magic or mana or anythin’.”

“Psionic technology is really rare across most of the Empire,” said Wiska. “And we didn’t even know you might have latent abilities before we came here. No one could think it was your fault.”

At least the twins agreed. Whoever ended up taking responsibility for the whole mess, it wouldn’t get pinned on me.

There obviously wasn’t much to do around the docking port at night, so we ended up killing time on board the ship until morning. Light exercise, training, napping, unpacking the stuff we’d brought from the forest in the Grald territory... It turned out there were plenty of ways to kill time.

After working out, I decided to eat some of that forest grub. I wouldn’t be able to take it with me, after all.

Mimi was thrilled by all the fresh produce. “What’s this, Master Hiro?”

“That’s called kokiri fruit. It’s sweet and delicious.”

“And this one?”

“That’s milberry. It’s a little sour, but tasty.”

“And this?”

“Mokori shroom. Good grilled or steamed.”

Other crew members gathered, drawn by Mimi’s squeals of excitement. I went to my room and dug out my portable cooking kit so me and Tinia could whip up a meal with it all. Split between all of us, it wasn’t exactly enough to fill our bellies, but Mimi was more than satisfied.

“What’s this glowing food?” she asked.

“That’s not food. I mean, it could be edible... Whoa, turn down the light!”

The seed flashed in Mimi’s arms like an alert signal. Mimi could instill fear even in inanimate objects! What a woman!

Tinia and Elma raced over.

“Eating that is out of the question!”

“Don’t do it, Mimi!”

I was surprised to see that Elma was as frantic as Tinia, but of course she was an elf too. And she’d been to Theta before, so she must know how important the sacred tree was.

“Um...it probably tastes bad anyway,” I said to Mimi.

“Oh, all right.”

“Th-thank goodness...” Tinia took the seed into her arms and breathed a sigh of relief. The seed flickered evenly, like it was sighing too. That thing was definitely intelligent.

The mechanics looked on with amusement.

“Kinda fun to watch ’em, huh?”

“It must be rough to *be* them, though.”

Tina and Wiska were wearing the blackout goggles they used during work as they quaffed their beloved booze, making for a surreal sight. Apparently they’d stopped drinking while I was missing—they must be making up for lost time.

“So what is this object?” Mimi asked.



“It’s a seed from the sacred tree the elves worship,” I answered.

“Oh...what? And I almost ate it?”

“Yep.”

“You could’ve said that sooner!”

Sorry. I’m not with the drinkers, but it was funny to watch.

“Just let Tinia handle that thing for now... Oh, hey, I forgot all about this.” I pulled the broken distress beacon from the pile of things salvaged from the forest. What a piece of crap! “I’d better put this aside. If we can track down the manufacturer, I have a thing or two to say to them.”

“Do you really want to go through all that trouble?”

“Maybe they’ll give me an upgrade at a discount.” We had plenty of space on the *Krishna*. I was willing to hang on to the broken beacon if there was a chance I could use it as a coupon for a better one. If that didn’t work out, we could sell it for scrap. Though, let’s be real, I was probably going to forget about it and let it gather dust in a corner of our storage bay.

We received a message from the elves as soon as the sun rose that morning. After some quick adjustments to the schedule, we invited Chieftain Zesh of the Grald Clan to visit with a small entourage to apologize. I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, but my crew was pissed. Not that I wasn’t a little mad too, but I tried to avoid fruitless arguments. As it was, I might have to step in to stop Mei from hurting somebody.

“Mei, remember restraint. Restraint.”

“Leave it to me, Master.”

“A simple apology is enough, seriously.”

“Understood. I will ensure that they grovel upon our floors and beg for forgiveness.”

“No, Mei. That’s not simple.”

“Their missteps could have resulted in your permanent loss, Master.

Furthermore, in addition to the internal disputes that delayed your rescue, these leaders inconvenienced you with their inability to fend off pirates on their own. I believe greater apologies are in order.”

“They didn’t inconvenience me.” I hadn’t even fought the pirates this time. Mei had piloted the *Black Lotus* while I was stranded in the wilderness.

“I was forced to fight the pirates myself due to the Leaf government’s ineptitude. As I am your property, they indirectly caused difficulties for you.”

“That’s kind of stretching it, Mei.”

“Not at all. While I am machine intelligence, I belong to you and act in that capacity.”

“Does that mean that if you caused a huge disaster, I’d be held responsible?”

“Yes. However, the probability of such an occurrence is essentially zero.” Mei’s face betrayed no emotion. Was she really incapable of making a mistake? I *could* think of times she’d messed up, but they were mostly minor mishaps and misunderstandings. The worst she’d ever done was hide things from me.

The elves arrived, and I told Elma and Mimi to guide them to the lounge while I made one last, desperate effort to convince Mei to play nice. It didn’t seem to have much effect. These elves were in store for a serious tongue-lashing.

“Just keep it cool,” I told her. “I didn’t invite them here so we could pick a fight.”

“It would be more logical to say that they are the ones who ‘picked a fight’ with you. One could even go so far as to call it attempted murder.”

“I’m pretty sure it was just my bad luck, that’s all.” I hated to say it, but my luck was more at fault than the elves were. Unless they could predict the future, there was no way they could’ve known the aircraft would crash and use it in some kind of assassination attempt. Why would they even do that? I figured Mei was overreacting.

As I tried one last time to persuade Mei, I felt the tension in the air grow. It felt as if something somehow...noisy was approaching. What was it now?

Elma appeared at the door to the dining hall, but an unfamiliar elf shoved her

aside and charged in. “Was it you? Are you the one who brought impure technology into our sacred forest and trampled on our traditions?”

In an instant, an aura of menace arose from Mei. *Oh, this guy’s a dead man.*

Taking my own life into my hands, I tried to step between them. “Whoa, okay, let’s stop and figure this mess ou—Mei, no! Stay! Heel! Calm down! Be cool!” I did my best to hold Mei back, but her artificial muscles and skeleton were many times stronger than my feeble human body.

Apologize, angry elf guy! And hurry! Don’t come crying to me when she cuts off your head!

“I apologize from the depths of my heart.”

Three minutes later, Chieftain Zesh was kneeling at my feet. He’d appeared in the nick of time and swung his sheathed sword at the angry elf, knocking him out mid-rant. One signal from Zesh, and his elven attendants were hauling the guy away.

“That was sudden, but sure, I accept your apology. What was that guy’s deal?”

Zesh raised his head. “He’s the head of a Grald Clan family known for its mastery of magic. It’s not worth getting into details, but his people have a deep mistrust of science and technology.”

So the Grald Clan wasn’t a monolith, huh. I wasn’t surprised; it made sense that it had its own factions, some of which were probably hard for the clan chieftain to keep in line.

“What was he doing on my ship?”

“He represents a group that opposed the Rosé Clan’s plans to transport you to our territory by spacecraft. It was at their insistence that we used the ynmuriliu-wing airship instead, and you were endangered as a result. We brought him here to apologize, but it seems he remains too proud.”

“Wow, seriously? Does this kind of thing happen a lot?” I couldn’t believe anyone expected that guy to apologize. He’d shown up looking for a fight.

“He seemed amenable last night. I suppose the sight of your advanced technology upset him again. He blocked us with magic and delayed our arrival. I am truly ashamed for my clan.” Zesh bowed his head to the floor again.

This guy, on the other hand, had made his sincerity clear. Even if the bowing and scraping was an act, he’d knocked out a member of his own clan for our sake. I’d have to have a heart of stone not to forgive him.

“As long as the Grald Clan takes responsibility for that guy lashing out at me,” I said, “consider it water under the bridge. As for the accident... Nobody could’ve predicted that, but Tinia and I could’ve died, and I hear the rescue was delayed by bickering between the clan factions. I just hope your apology is sincere.”

“I understand your concern. In your situation, I’d feel the same way. No, I’d demand greater restitution.”

“Did you think I’d want more?”

“Frankly...yes.” Zesh was still on his knees—meanwhile, I was lounging on the sofa.

“You’ve made a genuine apology without worrying about saving face. There was some unexpected trouble, but you dealt with it. You *will* deal with that guy, right?”

“Of course. Attacking someone during a diplomatic meeting is utterly unconscionable. I’ll see to it that he’s severely punished.”

“That’s all I want to hear. There are a few reasons I don’t have any other demands. First, you don’t have anything I want. Theta isn’t big on advanced ship tech, right? I’m not hurting for money, but if I was going to demand payment for damages, it’d be in the millions. Isn’t that right, Mei?”

“Correct. I estimate that sufficient compensation would be around 1.5 to 2.5 million Ener.”

At those numbers, the blood drained from Zesh’s face. As I’d expected, that was a lot of money to his clan. People who subsisted off the forest weren’t likely to be rolling in Imperial currency.

“That might be a ton of money to you guys, but to me it’s basically...well, not pocket change, but pretty standard income for a month’s work. I don’t want to be stuck here filling out contracts while you scrounge funds I don’t even need. That’d be wasting my time and yours, y’know?”

“Very well. But surely there’s something we can do.”

“Of course. I mean, if you came expecting forgiveness with nothing to offer in return, even a nice guy like me might get pissed off and use my privilege as an honorary noble to cut you down. You get what I mean here?”

“Yes, sir.” Zesh nodded solemnly, his face going even paler. I’d mentioned my status to both Lilium and Tinia, so the chieftains would be very much aware of it.

Mei spoke up. “Per my research, while Leafil System chieftains are treated with high regard on their own planets, they are essentially commoners under Imperial law. As such, my Master is legally permitted to execute any one of you if he sees fit. I do not speak figuratively.”

“Mei! I’m not gonna do that. You don’t have to threaten him. I just wanted to lay out the situation so we can reach some kind of common-sense agreement. We came here for a vacation, after all. If you could arrange a stay at a nice inn, some local delicacies, drinks for my crew, maybe nice jewelry and clothes for the girls... And not a million Ener worth or anything. Just a few tokens of goodwill.”

“I see. I shall have to give this serious thought, but I believe we can find a way to make amends.”

“You do that. Oh, and, um, no need for...female entertainment or anything. I may look like a womanizer, but trust me, I’m more than good on that end.”

“Duly noted, sir.”

Good. At least I wouldn’t pick up any extra crew members on this trip. If there was one sure way to fend off potential new girlfriends, it was mentioning all my existing girlfriends.

“All right. I think that’ll do for apologies and reparations. Tinia?”

“Yes?” Tinia, who’d been waiting nearby, stepped forth. She’d been in Zesh’s field of vision the whole time, but the sight of her walking up made him breathe a sigh of relief.

“Tinia...”

“I’m fine, Father. Thanks to Sir Hiro, I survived our ordeal without a scratch. He saved me.”

“She saved me, too,” I chimed in. “She used magic to heal me from near-death, and we couldn’t have made it without her knowledge of the forest. In fact, since we helped each other equally...” I glanced at Mei, but she shook her head. I wasn’t going to be allowed to let the Grald Clan off the hook. “Oh, and it’s not all bad news. I think you’ve already noticed this, but...”

I gestured to Tinia—more specifically, to the glowing football in her arms. It shone more brightly as we looked at it, like it was trying to look majestic. *Cut it out. You’ll blind us.*

“We found it near the crash site. Apparently it’s a big deal?”

“Oh, gracious, yes. Absolutely.” Zesh assumed his most serious expression. His eyes were glued to the seed. “Tinia? Were you the one who found it?”

“No, Father, it was Sir Hiro.”

“Gracious! But perhaps that’s to be expected of one with such power. Does this mean you will be the maiden?”

“Yes.”

They launched into an exchange that sounded deeply meaningful, but I couldn’t follow a word of it. Why did people keep leaving me out of important-sounding stuff?

“Sorry, but can you tell me what you’re discussing? I’m not sure I like the sound of it.”

“Ah, well... It would take too long to explain in full, but we’re discussing the nurturing of this seed.”

“Nurturing?” I echoed like an idiot. Couldn’t they just plant it in the ground and water it?

“The damage dealt to our sacred tree was enormous. Even now, its life force is sputtering out. Fortunately, it has prepared a new seed, the one Tinia holds in her very arms. Do you understand so far?”

“Yeah, Tinia told me that much.”

“Well, to germinate a sacred tree seed, we must offer up vast quantities of mana. The legends say that the seed always appears before a hero with great mana to offer. This person is fated to be the guardian of the tree.”

“That’s a hell of a story.”

“In other words, Sir Hiro,” said Tinia, “you’ve been selected as the guardian.”

“Not you, Tinia? Me?”

“There’s no doubt about it. Even the seed is saying so.”

“Come again? It’s *saying* that?”

“Indeed. Little by little, I’m learning to communicate with it.”

“That’s kind of creepy.” Was it taking over her mind or something? “And what exactly does this guardian do?”

“You would be required to supply mana to the seed and protect it until it germinates... But as you are neither an elf nor a believer, we cannot force you to take on this task.”

“I’d like to see you try. I don’t plan to stick around that long.”

“It is unprecedented for a guardian to refuse their duty.” Tinia sighed. “But it’s equally unprecedented for an outsider to be chosen. Is there no way we can convince you to take on the duty?”

The seed glowed in Tinia’s arms, as if demanding that I agree. That thing was seriously getting on my nerves.

“You’d better tell me the whole deal,” I said reluctantly.

“Yes, of course. Mind you, it will be a long explanation...”

It sure was. Long story short, a new sacred tree was supposed to herald the coming of a new age. The person who discovered the seed and became its guardian was fated to become a great hero.

“What is this, the sword in the stone?” I muttered. It was like the heroic legends back on Earth: King Arthur pulling the sword out of the stone, the Norse hero Sigmund pulling a magic sword out of an apple tree. You know the drill. The chosen one discovers some item that represents power, valor, and honor. “No thanks. This thing’s the biggest red flag I’ve ever seen. Get it out of my face.”

“No, no, no!” Zesh protested. “This is an indescribable honor!” The seed flashed like a loose light bulb in agreement.

“I’m not falling for sweet talk! I bet the chosen one dies in some horrible way in exchange for his stupid honor and glory!”

“N-not at all,” Zesh stammered. “I don’t believe that’s ever happened...”

“If you’re gonna lie to me, at least make it sound convincing!” I snapped at Zesh and the flickering red flag. “As soon as this meeting’s over, I’m saying goodbye to this system. I don’t know why I stuck around this long. There’s nothing keeping us here, right? No? Good, we’re out.”

“No! Please wait! I must share this revelation with the clans and discuss how to deal with it. I beg of you, give us a few more days!” Zesh dropped to his knees again. “And what about your apology gifts? We’ll need time to assemble them. We will, of course, provide you with the finest of lodgings until then.”

I groaned. Zesh was really groveling now, and I felt like I’d do anything to make him stop. Maybe just a couple of days... No. No compromises. That was how I’d gotten stuck in all kinds of messes in the past. I had to be firm—

Mimi, who’d been watching all this drama in silence, spoke up. “Master Hiro, is this really worth being stubborn about?”

What the hell? Was she too dazzled by elven hospitality to see trouble looming? “What do you mean, Mimi?”

“Well...” She averted her eyes. “If it wasn’t this seed, it’d be something else...”

I fell silent. I got what she was saying. I was going to attract trouble no matter what, so I might as well accept the trouble that came with a magic item and a heroic destiny and stuff...

The rest of the crew gathered around Mimi.

“Yep.”

“She’s right...”

“Unfortunately, I have to agree.”

“You know what they say, Master. ‘In for a penny, in for a pound.’”

“I don’t want a pound of anything! I don’t even want the penny!” Even as I protested, I knew it was useless. No matter how I tried to escape, I’d be stuck on Theta for another week, minimum.

Dammit.

Chapter 8:

The Willrose Family

IN THE END, we stayed at the inn near the port where we'd had our welcome banquet. The treatment was even more lavish than it had been at the beginning of our vacation. I felt like some kind of king.

If that had been all, I'd have settled in and accepted my lot. But then somehow the Thetan media found out we were here and swarmed the place. I refused all intel didn't talk to reporters views and put out a statement that my crew and I would even if all the chieftains of Theta did. That didn't stop the press, of course: they just switched to monitoring us from afar with drone cameras.

It was impossible to relax, so I filed a complaint with the three chieftains. I might not have been real nobility, but I was *honorary* nobility, and that was good enough. As if someone of my standing was going to let them record me all they wanted, for free! When my thinly veiled threat trickled down to the media, the drones disappeared at once. Damn, it was good to be nobility.

"You know, Tinia," I said, "you fit in well with our little group."

"Do I?" We were playing cards. Tinia sat with the seed in her lap, looking primly over her hand. She was as refined as ever, but she'd gotten way more comfortable around us. She'd slept and eaten with the crew, and the girls were all taken by her kindness, her sharp intelligence, and her knowledge of Theta.

"She's one of us, after all."

"Yep. Just another girl rescued from dire straits by Hiro."

"That's what happened with us."

"Miss Christina, too. And maybe Miss Serena?"

If that's your criteria, you might as well add Dr. Shouko to the list. Maybe not Princess Luciada, though. As for Serena... It's a thin line, but I guess she could count.

I brushed off the thought. All that mattered was that Tinia had become a friend. She really was almost part of the crew...though I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"We've been stuck indoors for a while," I said. "Why don't we go out?"

"That depends on what you have in mind. No leaving Theta, got it?" Elma took the Joker from my hand, shuffled it into her own hand without the slightest reaction, and offered her cards to Mimi. I couldn't tell whether Mimi took the Joker or not, because she always shuffled her cards no matter what she pulled.

"Rosé Clan territory, of course. We've got time to kill, and you wanted to say hi to the family, didn't you?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, I guess. I'll call them after we finish this game."

"You have their contact info?"

"I got it from Lilium," Elma replied with a shrug. We were good to go, then.

Mimi lost the game. She had the worst poker face.

The Willroses told Elma we could visit at any time, so we decided to leave at once. Instant decision, instant action. We were light on our feet in a way only mercs could be.

"Are you sure you want me along?" Tinia asked. She sat in the sub-operator's seat, the seed still in her lap. I remembered that she came from a conservative, deeply religious clan. Was she uncomfortable visiting the territory of a clan that was so progressive and scientifically minded?

"I'm not supposed to let you and that seed out of my sight, am I? If they've got a problem with you, I'll deal with them. Don't you worry about a thing."

She blushed faintly and smiled. "Very well."

Tina and Wiska, sitting together in the specialized twin seat they'd installed for themselves, hooted at me.

"There he goes, the lady-killer!"

"He strikes when you least expect it, doesn't he?"

"Pipe down, you two," I scolded them. I wasn't trying to put the moves on

Tinia. She was our crew's guest and friend, and if anyone stepped up to her, I had a responsibility to step up in response. "Mei, are you sure you're okay there?"

"There is no need to worry about me." With Tinia in the cockpit with us, Mei didn't have a seat, so she was stuck standing by the door. I'd offered to bring in a chair from the lounge, but she insisted she was fine. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if she could keep her perfect balance while I did a barrel roll in a dogfight. I'd seen her perform more amazing feats than that.

"Welp..." Elma sighed. "Are we doing this, or what?"

"You don't sound too excited about it."

"It's just... To them, I'm still the cute little girl they knew. But I'm not a kid anymore."

That explained her change of mood. The Willroses must've said something that set her off when she called them. But they were still her family, even if she was less than thrilled about seeing them, so we'd have to grin and bear it.

The elves of the Rosé Clan had been called reformists, progressives, even science fanatics. That reputation went all the way back to the days when the Grakkan Emperor had personally led his territorial expansion. Back then, they were a small clan on the brink of dying out.

When the first Emperor landed on Theta, he was impressed by the Rosé Clan's determination and unyielding spirit in the face of overwhelming odds. He helped the elves eliminate the "demonkin," a race of beings that threatened them at the time, and invited all clans—including the tiny Rosé Clan—to follow him into space and join his campaign.

"Therefore, it's no exa...exagigeration to say that our great clan's history is one and the same as that of the Grakkan Empire."

"Cool."

The tiny elf girl at my side beamed proudly. She was the youngest daughter of the head of the Willrose family, and she was a lively little one. It was as

impossible as ever to guess the ages of elves, but she certainly looked and acted like a child.

“The Willrose family values history. Cappertin Hiro, you came from the sky and saved us, just like the first Emperor. We feel a special aff...affinery for you.”

“Yeah, cool, thanks.”

Her diminutive stature and difficulty with long words made the extreme formality of her speech very funny. This history lesson would’ve been much less entertaining from some ancient elf patriarch or dowager. It’s always important to pick your speaker well.

We’d made it to the Willrose family seat in Rosé Clan territory. As far as I could make out, the entire stem family lived in one high-rise building, which was divided into elven condos. At the moment, we were being shown around the rooftop garden by this smug elf child.

“Now, Cappertin Hiro, it is your turn. What stories will you share?”

“Um, I dunno. I could tell you about the capital, I guess.”

“Ooh! The storied capital!”

The little girl listened raptly as I described the Ecumenopolis that covered an entire planet. Elma staggered over wearily.

“Did you escape?” I asked her.

“Give me a break already...”

I’d never seen her so haggard. The Willrose women had started by probing her at length about her relationship with me. And then they’d showed us countless holo-photos of the visit she’d made when she was a little girl. Elma clearly found every second excruciating.

She collapsed, laying her head in my lap. I stoked her hair reassuringly.

The little elf girl piped up, “Ooh, look at you, fwirting openly!”

Suddenly an elf woman popped out of nowhere. “So there you are, Elma. My, my, my!”

And another one! “My, my, my.”

Wild elf women appeared! They were swarming like video game mobs. *C'mon, ladies, give Elma a break...* She was burying her head in my lap, trying to close herself off from the world.

"Are you and Salma getting along, too?" one of the elf ladies asked me.

"He ought to take Salma with him! Give her twenty more years, and she'll be just as pretty as Elma!"

"My ship's already full, thanks."

The girl turned big, moist eyes on me. "You don't want me?"

"Nope. Tears aren't gonna work on me either."

She clicked her tongue in annoyance. That little brat! I was even more annoyed by her behavior when the women made it clear that she was eighteen. Though physically still a child, she was a full elfen lady with an intellect befitting her age.

"Having seen your crew," said the brat, "I expected you to be a fool for women. You're more guarded than I thought."

"I hear he doesn't fool around with those dwarf girls," said one of the women. "Perhaps Salma looks too young for him."

"Hmph. I'm full of the ver...the vigor of youth, and I have plenty of potenterial, unlike you old bats!"

"Salma..."

"What? Hey! Un-claw me!" Salma shrieked as the older women pinched her with iron strength. Not for the first time since arriving at the Willrose estate, I felt like I was seeing things I shouldn't.

How can I put this? The Willrose stem family was...welcoming, to put it kindly. To put it less kindly, there seemed to be no distance between us and them from the moment we met.

"The Willroses at the capital told us so much about you and the girls, Hiro." An elf woman beamed at me. "They sent holo-photos, too. You hardly feel like a stranger at all. Sorry if we're being a little too familiar."

“Hey, it beats being distant.”

Another woman circled around the chaise I was sitting on, put her hands on my shoulders, and whispered in my ear, “No need to be formal around us.” *Urk!* Why did she smell so nice?

“Don’t be shy. Indulge yourself! Is Ame around?”

“She’s not much older than Salma, but she’s very cute.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? She’s not cuter than me!”

With that, I was surrounded again.

This was why I’d fled to the rooftop garden in the first place. These elven women doted on me so hard it was like I was a little kid—albeit a kid they were trying to marry off to every unattached relative who wandered by.

Given elven lifespans, their mothering made sense. I didn’t know how old they were, and there was no way I’d ask, but they were definitely older than me. They looked at least Elma’s age. To them, I must seem like a child.

As it happened, the Willrose men were away right now. They were all enlisted in the star system army, so they’d been out for the past month dealing with the ongoing piracy crisis. Poor guys.

The elven women were closing in on me when a chime rang out through the garden.

“A visitor?”

“That’s odd. We didn’t expect anyone besides Elma and her crew...” One of the women—I got the impression she was the wife of the family head—activated her terminal. “Hello? ...Yes, it’s been a while. Today? ...That’s not for me to decide. I’ll have to ask him. Wait just a moment...” She turned to me. “It’s Nekt, the son of Minpha Chieftain Miriam. He’s asking to meet with you, Hiro. May I invite him up here?”

“It’d make trouble for you if I refused, wouldn’t it?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. It would be his fault for arriving without an appointment.”

“I still don’t want to cause friction over nothing. If you’re okay with it, so am I.”

“What a good boy you are, Hiro. Have you considered joining the clan seat here? I can’t take on another son, but any number of other families would be happy to adopt you.”

“Sorry, but I’m good.” I stroked Elma’s hair as she lay immobile in my lap. The woman smiled indulgently. At least she seemed to understand.

“It’s good to finally meet you while conscious. I’m Nekt, son of Chieftain Miriam. Thank you for what you did for me, sir.”

Fully recovered from his injuries, Nekt was a dazzlingly pretty young elf with a head of shining blond hair. It was impossible to resent him for his good looks, though—he was so friendly and earnest I couldn’t help liking him.

“I’m just glad to see you’ve recovered,” I said.

“Thanks to you, yes. Frankly, I remember almost nothing from my time in that ship, but I understand I would’ve died without your help. Thank you so much.” Nekt bowed. For once, I didn’t feel uncomfortable being thanked. He was just too damn sincere and natural about it. “Also, I should apologize for my mother’s behavior. I’ve only heard secondhand accounts, but it sounds like she was rather pushy toward you.”

At his side, Chieftain Miriam said unhappily, “I did no such thing! I only offered to train him, that’s all.” It was hard to believe that this youthful blonde beauty was Nekt’s mother. Elves really were something.

“Sorry for dropping by without warning, but I brought a gift. I hope you enjoy it.” Nekt produced a large metal case and placed it on the table. It looked awfully imposing. “We hear you’ve been searching for rare drinks, Sir Hiro.”

“Oh, yeah. But what I’m looking for may not even exist...” I stared gloomily into the distance. Once again I was reminded of the greatest disappointment of the trip: my failure to find soda.

“You see, the Minpha Clan produces medicinal drinks that aren’t widely

available elsewhere on Theta. They're made by doctors and herbalists from the wild areas near Grald Clan territory as health supplements."

"Oh?" My interest was piqued. As I recalled, sodas on my world had started out as pharmaceutical drinks and herbal brews, like root beer. Maybe the Minpha Clan had developed something similar.

"I've prepared a few award-winning recipes from past brewing competitions."

"Good work, my man. Let's do a taste test! We can hang out on my ship. You've never been on a spaceship, right? I'll take you on a sightseeing flight. Heck, if you want, we can go hunting for pirates together!"

That did it. Nekt was my new best friend. Was I laying it on a little thick? Well, duh. I wasn't a saint, a prince, an upright leader, or anything like that. I was just a guy desperate to drink some soda!

Thirty minutes later, I sat in silence.

"Hon, you've got a funny look on your face," said Tina.

"Yeah..." I sighed. "Figures."

Nekt's local drinks all had an awful medicinal smell. To be fair, it wasn't totally different from root beer. I could taste faint notes of the flavor I was looking for. But there wasn't any of that sweet, refreshing fizz. These primitive beverages were barely stretching their fingers toward the glory of soda.

Nekt looked almost as disappointed as I felt. "It seems they weren't to your liking, eh?"

"No, don't blame yourself. I have to confront reality. If you take this one or this one and work on them a little, though, I think you'll get some tasty drinks. I have connections with a soft drink manufacturer, if you'd like me to get you in touch with them."

"Yes, maybe. I'll have to talk to the recipe holders first."

"Yeah, of course." I gave Nekt the contact info for the product development guy I'd met, and asked Mei to send the brewery a message letting them know to expect a call. They'd probably want advance warning before dealing with a chieftain's son.

While I was sampling the drinks, Miriam had been examining the seed in Tinia's arms.

"So this is the seed of the sacred tree. Marvelous." She was sketching on her tablet terminal as she questioned the seed through Tinia. "Is its guardian feeding it enough mana?"

I shrugged. "I mean, I hold it like Tinia does when I've got time."

"That isn't enough. The seed can absorb mana from those who touch it, but it will grow better if you actively infuse it with mana. I recommend practicing magic!"

"I dunno..."

"It will reduce the time you need to spend with the seed. I hear you're eager to complete the nurturing cycle."

I was impressed, but not too surprised. She hadn't made it to the top of one of the three biggest elven clans without developing serious diplomatic skills. She knew what she wanted, and she knew how to make me want the same thing. Smart.

"Okay, you got me. Let's give it a try."

"You decide quickly. Truly the mark of the platinum rank."

After making it clear that I didn't want to spend too much time on this magic business, I took off in the *Krishna* with Mei, Tinia, Nekt, and Miriam. The rest of the crew stayed on the Willrose estate to hobnob.

Miriam gazed around the ship with interest. "Amazing. My work as chieftain has never taken me on board a mercenary ship before."

"This is a valuable experience," Nekt agreed.

Nekt sat in the sub-pilot seat, Miriam in the operator seat, and Tinia in the sub-operator seat. Mei took her position by the cockpit door, and I punched in the coordinates for the training ground Miriam had suggested.

"It's pretty remote, isn't it?" I said. "In fact, it's in the middle of nowhere."

“That is by design,” said Miriam. “Your latent power is formidable. We have no idea what may happen when you awaken to magic.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. I’m not going to explode, am I?”

“*You* will be perfectly safe.” Miriam smiled, but her eyes were harder to read.

Uneasy, I flew to the coordinates. We landed in a big, empty clearing.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“This is the Minpha Clan’s magic training ground. It’s far from any habitation, so it can be used to practice greater magic and ritual spells.”

Miriam led us out of the *Krishna* and onto the training ground. I noticed that she was able to open the hatch and deploy the trap ladder without any instruction from me. The lady had a quick mind, a sharp eye, or both.

“Sorry,” said Nekt. “When Mother gets a notion into her head, I can’t stop her.”

“Can anyone?”

He shook his head apologetically. “Father married into the clan, so he doesn’t have much power. My sister can stand up to her, but she’s off working for the star system fleet.”

“I didn’t think the Minpha Clan had people in space.”

“We’re not as homebound or technophobic as the Grald Clan. Our clan is still based on Theta, but I’d say a good twenty or thirty percent of us are out in space like the people of the Rosé Clan.”

“Elves are growing more spacebound,” said Tinia. “It’s the hard truth.”

“You don’t plan to leave, do you, Tinia?”

“No. Especially not after recent developments.”

Nekt and Tinia spoke like close friends. Come to think of it, the pirate attack had disrupted their wedding, didn’t it? What was their situation? I didn’t know if I should ask.

Miriam stopped before a flat rock. “Sit here.”

I sat down cross-legged. It seemed like an ordinary rock, but there was something sculpted about it. No use thinking too hard about it. I'd agreed to try to do magic, and all I could do was obey orders.

"That will do. Tinia, give him the seed of the sacred tree."

"Of course." Tinia handed me the seed without hesitation. I accepted it just as readily, sat it in my lap, and put my hands on it. The seed glowed steadily. It seemed pleased.

"Power is flowing through your hands and into the seed. Perceiving that is the first step." Miriam took a device out of her pouch and turned it on.

"Is that a personal shield?" I asked.

"The moment you awaken to magic, your power may fly out of control. We need to take precautions."

"Chieftain, I will wait outside the shield," said Mei.

"That would be dangerous."

"I will stand nearby, then," she said, stepping away from the shield. If I knew Mei, she wanted to be able to help me in case anything went wrong. I was less than ten meters from her and the others, and from that distance she could reach me in a second.

"Now to begin. Concentrate. Feel the flow of power."

"Concentrate, huh?"

I focused my senses on the seed in my hands and closed my eyes, hoping to feel something. Trying to feel something I couldn't see was a tall order, to say the least. Back in my old life, I'd read manga where aliens collected magical balls, a teen delinquent blew away demons with his spirit gun, and people psychically manifested spirits that could punch dudes out. I'd sit there and try to summon those powers for myself. Would it actually work this time?

This was no manga. Magic—psionic ability—whatever you wanted to call it—was a real force in this universe. In spite of myself, the idea that I might be able to use it got my inner edgy teenager all hopped up.

"Concentrate," Miriam snapped. "You have too many distracting thoughts."

“Yes, ma’am.” Okay. Concentrate. Concentrate... How does that work, exactly?

I held my breath and slowed the world down. I still didn’t know what exactly happened when I did this, but it was the only supernatural power I’d figured out how to use so far. It seemed to focus my mind...

Just then, it felt like something was sucked from my palms into the seed. Was it the mana Miriam was talking about? Still holding my breath, I focused my mind on my palms and tried to actively feed the seed what it was absorbing from me.

The next moment, there was an explosion of light.

“Too bright! Ow, and too hot!”

It felt like my palms were on fire. Reflexively, I tossed the seed away. I couldn’t see a thing. It was like I’d stared into a camera’s flash.

As I groaned and put a hand over my eyes, I felt someone pick me up. Definitely Mei. I knew resistance was futile, so I let her lift me.

But did this mean I’d awakened my latent psionic powers?

Mei threw me back in the medical pod. Fortunately, it didn’t take long to heal my scorched eyes and hands.

“That was awful,” I groaned.

“Agreed,” said Miriam. “My eyes are still sore.”

“It was downlight blinding,” said Tinia.

“Master, I advise you never to touch the seed again.”

“You know that’s not an option. I have to keep giving it power.” I glanced at Tinia. The seed was in her arms, glowing steadily. Its light had definitely gotten stronger—it was a continuous glow, now, instead of a regular pulse. “How’s it doing, by the way?”

Tinia examined the seed. “I believe it’s struggling to manage the sudden influx of power.”

“Good thing it didn’t explode or anything.”

“That would be unheard of,” Miriam declared. “In fact, the sacred seed saved us.”

“You mean...”

“I underestimated your latent power. Had the seed not absorbed most of the energy you released, you could have turned the entire area into a crater.”

“Well, that’s terrifying.”

When I asked for more details, Miriam explained that the blast of light and heat that had temporarily fried our eyeballs was nothing compared to the mana the seed had absorbed to protect us.

“Guess it could’ve been worse, huh? I don’t feel like I’ve awakened to any special powers, though.”

“There are tools to measure magic.” Miriam took a few things out of her bag that looked like crystal balls. She explained how to use them, and I followed her instructions with each one. At last she furrowed her brow and said, “It makes no sense.”

The crystal balls couldn’t identify what type of psionic ability I had. All Miriam could say was that my powers didn’t belong to the categories of elemental magic that elves knew best. These elemental abilities sounded like RPG magic: controlling natural phenomena like fire, water, earth, wind, electricity, light, darkness, stuff like that.

“Are there types of magic besides those...elemental ones?” I asked.

“Countless more. Even the people of your outer worlds know of telepathy; extrasensory perception; telekinesis, the power to move things without touching them; and teleportation or short-leaping, the power to fold space.”

“Are there places you can go to learn those abilities?”

“Not here, and nowhere in all the Grakkan Empire. You would need to seek out the Holy Verthalz Empire, where psionic technology is more advanced.”

“Outside the Grakkan Empire, huh? Sounds far away.”

“It’s extremely far, even for an agile mercenary such as yourself. However, your power has already awakened. In the course of your travels, you may find

more opportunities to get in touch with it. When such a time comes, do not rush things. Work patiently to understand your power.”

“Got it.”

I didn’t have much in the way of cool psychic powers yet, but we’d laid the foundation so I could learn more when the time was right. In video game terms, I’d unlocked a skill tree, I guess. At any rate, I’d keep an eye out for opportunities to learn more, but I didn’t expect miracles.

“...So after all that, I don’t have much to show for it.”

“I’m just glad everyone’s safe.”

We had dinner at the Willrose estate, taking the elven ladies up on their offer to make us some traditional clan dishes. All of it was prepared simply from fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit.

“This is just an ordinary home-cooked dinner in our parts,” said the Willrose matriarch.

“We don’t get anything like this in space,” said Mimi. “Colony food plants prioritize nutritional density over flavor, so they mostly produce slurry for food cartridges. And colonies don’t have nearly enough resources to raise livestock, so the best they can make is cultured meat.”

Like humans, livestock needed to eat, breathe, burp, and fart. The gases produced by a herd of cattle could wreak havoc with a colony’s atmosphere. It was all but impossible to raise animals in the limited space of a colony. So colonists relied on food cartridges made from microscopic planktons and small amounts of vegetable matter. Cultured meat, made from organisms that didn’t put too much of a burden on a colony’s life support systems, provided protein. The food scientists who could turn those raw materials into something edible were highly regarded.

Mimi was busy explaining that the white meat we often ate was synthetic, rather than cultured. It was manufactured entirely from chemicals.

“Cultured meat and synthetic meat?” said one of the ladies. “Is there a

difference?”

“Yes,” Mimi explained. “Cultured meat is made from engineered lifeforms that feed on the waste from colonies and spaceships. They look pretty gross, to be honest.”

Mimi broke off speaking and drifted into a thousand-yard stare. The cultured meat factory we’d toured in the Arein System had been a shock. Those huge, white tentacle-earthworm things... I tried to stop thinking about it. I was trying to eat here.

“Anyway, real meat and veggies are expensive in space,” said Mimi. “Even the smallest cut of top-quality beef, 100 grams, costs 1,000 Ener.”

“A thousand Ener for 100 grams of beef? Goodness.”

“Even our family would go bankrupt if we ate that every day.”

Some of the elves were stunned, while others laughed dryly. The people of the Willrose family seemed well-off, but clearly their wealth had limits. Even a mercenary with a screwed-up sense of money like me hesitated to pay that much for a steak.

The women turned their attention to Tinia. “How are you, my lady?”

“Very well, thank you. You’re all wonderful cooks.”

“Aw, you’re a little stiff. Relax a little, why don’t you?”

“Need a drink?”

Not even Tinia was spared from their onslaught. In fact, they seemed extra attentive to her. Were they just being considerate to an important guest, or was there more to it?

“You’re so lovely and well-bred, but your clan... We’ve heard so many things, you know.”

“You should get out of there. I’m sure Hiro and his friends would be happy to take you!”

No doubt about it: underneath the friendly fussing, they were upset about something. *What’s the deal?*

Noticing my gaze, Elma leaned over and whispered into my ear. “Tinias was abducted by pirates, and after that she spent a night with you. There’s gossip in the Grald Clan about...well, how she managed to get rescued, and how she was picked to be the maiden of the sacred tree.”

“What?” I lowered my voice. “That’s disgusting!”

“I know. Some people are awful.”

But my hands were tied. If I tried to step in and defend her, it’d just add to the gossip. The best thing I could do for Tinias, I decided, was to help that seed germinate so she could prove her legitimacy as the tree maiden. If she provided Theta with a healthy new sacred tree, not even the haters would be able to complain.

“Are you thinking of inviting her to leave with us?” Elma asked me.

“I dunno. I don’t think she’d go for it.” Tinias sure didn’t seem like the person who’d let a few nasty rumors stop her. Besides, it was her duty to protect the seed so it could take root in her homeland. I doubted that she’d throw that aside and go gallivanting in space with us. “Well, let’s see how things play out. We’ll help her in any way we can.”

“Yeah, agreed.” Elma nodded in understanding and went back to eating.

This was a rare opportunity to sample elven home cooking, after all, so it was time to put our problems aside and enjoy the meal.

Epilogue

“O_{KAY, EVERYONE,}” I declared. “Time to discuss our next destination!”

Mimi let out a whoop, smiling and clapping. We’d spent a night at the Willrose estate, but now, despite protests from Elma’s family, we’d returned to the *Black Lotus* for a crew meeting.

Tinia sat with us, cradling the seed. “Are you leaving Theta already? But there’s still so much to do.”

“Well, not quite yet. But this visit was basically a vacation, and we need to get back into work mode. If we want time to gather info and get supplies together, we need to start planning now.”

“I see.” Tinia looked impressed. Like most people, she’d probably imagined that mercenaries rampaged at random, flying from one star system to the next with no goal other than adventure. To be fair, there were mercs like that.

“May we offer opinions, too?” Wiska asked.

“Of course. If you’ve got ideas, I wanna hear ’em.” Whether we decided to adopt those ideas was another matter, but I wanted as many opinions as I could get. “Let me give you a rough direction, though. I want us to focus on increasing our strength.”

Tina frowned thoughtfully. “What kinda strength?”

“We may have reached our limit with the *Krishna*,” said Wiska. “We’ve powered up everything we can, but there are too many mysterious parts.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “The heavy laser cannons seem to be specialized fixed arms, so they can’t be replaced. The only things we might be able to change up are the flak cannons and anti-ship reactive torpedoes.”

“I guess you could replace the torpedo launcher in the lower weapons bay with a seeker missile pod, but that’s about it,” said Tina. “You don’t wanna swap out the flak cannons, and I can’t think of a better shield system or suspension than what ya got already.”

“I’m not losing the torpedoes. They’re our trump card.” We didn’t have many opportunities to fire the torpedoes, but I liked to have that one last trick up my sleeve in battles with larger ships. Seeker missile pods would give me more options against smaller opponents, but the heavy lasers and flak cannons were enough in that department.

“Does that mean you want to beef up the *Black Lotus*, then?”

“Improving the EML on the bow would be hard,” I said, “but I’d like to upgrade the laser cannons and shields to military-grade equipment.”

“That would make it a heck of a lot tougher. The generator’s got power to spare, but I bet we could swap it for an even better one.”

“I understand wanting to improve our mothership,” said Elma, “but there are downsides to making it *too* high-spec.”

“Blah blah blah, I can’t heear yooou.” I knew I was taking things too far, but my gamer’s instincts were crying out for the biggest and shiniest power-ups. Sure, this was real life, not a game, but wasn’t it natural to strive for the best?

Stat whoring? I don’t know what you’re talking about.

“It may be excessive for fighting space pirates,” Mimi reminded Elma, “but it’s not just pirates we fight out there.”

“That’s true,” said Elma. “I hope we never run into those crystal life-forms again.”

“We could always get hired to fight in a war,” I added.

“Do you plan to take on work like that?”

“Depends.”

We’d been in a war once, joining a battle against the Belbellum Federation back in the Tarmein System, the system where I’d met Mimi and Elma. We could’ve run for it, but at the time I needed the money. These days, I had a Gold Star and a title, and I suspected it’d be a lot harder to turn down a commission to fight if conflict came to a sector I was in.

I checked my power-up wish list. “Right, I’d also like to find lightweight power armor so I can really swing my swords.”

Mimi's jaw dropped. "You want to be even *more* unstoppable in hand-to-hand combat?"

"Look, I don't like it, but sometimes it's a life-or-death matter. I don't like it either!" It was so not-nice I had to say it twice. Lately I'd been forced to fight up close and personal way more often than I'd like. I had to be ready.

"If you want to improve your fighting skills," said Mimi, "what happened to your plans to learn magic?"

"Not much progress there. Apparently I might figure something out if I'm in danger."

Elma smiled. "It requires patience."

She was right, but that wasn't my strong suit. "Look, even if I did pick up some kind of amazing magic power, I wouldn't want to use it except as a last resort. Showing that stuff off would just lead to trouble."

"No kidding!" Tina agreed.

"Are you afraid that if you use your powers too much, you could draw the attention of...*the dark side*?" Wiska sounded a little too into the idea.

"I think you've been readin' too many holo-novels and comics," Tina told her. "You could be on to somethin' though. If he figures out how to cut a ship in half with his bare hands, or crush it to smithereens, the Empire might decide he's too dangerous to have runnin' around."

That was closer to what I'd been thinking. If I turned into some kind of human plasma grenade, the Empire might decide to do something about me. That was a scary thought.

"Crazy psionic abilities are still beyond me, anyway, in more ways than one. I think lightweight power armor is a common-sense investment. I'm through with stuff like fighting weirdo biological weapons on a mid-terraforming planet without decent armor."

"So ya say, but ya came home just fine."

"That doesn't mean I'll be fine next time." Not even I could believe I'd survived such a harsh environment. Never again, I say. "Anyway, all of this is to

say that I'd like to check out a high-tech system or a merchant hub where we can score those kinds of upgrades."

Mimi gave it some thought. "For somewhere high-tech, the Galei System would fit the bill. That's not too far from here. As for a merchant hub... It's a bit of a journey, but I'd suggest the Mira System."

"Could we use a gateway?"

Gateways provided instant transportation to distant star systems. The Grakkan Empire had constructed a network of gateways throughout all its territories, and those would let us reach worlds that were too far away even for our hyperdrive.

"Let me see..." Mimi tapped on her tablet, then stopped with a wry grin.

"What is it?"

"You know, the capital has everything you're looking for."

"Denied." I didn't want to go back there. It was a one-way ticket to ridiculous complications. Maybe someone would attempt to assassinate the Emperor, maybe Princess Luciada would be kidnapped and I'd have to save her... The sky was the limit. No, thanks.

"In that case, the Galei System and Mira System are our best bets."

"Okay, those are our two leading candidates. Any other opinions?"

"If we want to make money," Elma suggested gently, "I say we go to a border conflict zone or somewhere piracy has been reported. We could always do that after getting those upgrades, though."

Tina shrugged. "No bright ideas from me. Wis?"

"Me neither. I'd like to visit a high-tech system and have a look at the latest military advances, though."

"The idea of a trade hub sounds good," said Mimi. "I bet they have rare food from all over."

"Good point." Trade hubs offered goods from the most distant reaches of space...which, now I thought about it, meant they might have carbonated

drinks. My search hadn't turned up anything in the Sierra System, but that didn't mean they couldn't show up as rare exports somewhere.

Not that I was holding my breath.

"So which destination do we choose?" I said.

"Prices will be lower in the Galei System," said Mimi. "The merchant hub system will have more options, but the shipping makes them more expensive. And I don't know if we'll be able to get military-grade tech there. Companies sell those products directly to the military, so merchants can't often get their hands on them."

"The Galei System for quality and low prices, or the Mira System for a wide selection, huh?"

"Why not both?" said Elma.

"There's an idea," said Mimi. "We could stop at the Galei System first, then head to the Mira System for whatever we can't find there. The trade hub will be the place to gather info, too."

"Now you're talking like a mercenary."

"I've been growing." Laughing, Mimi puffed out her chest proudly. Not that she needed to do any more growing in *that* department.

"That settles it. Our next destination is the Galei—" Before I could finish, I was interrupted by the buzz of my terminal's call tone. *Bzzzzt!* It was like a very loud incorrect answer buzzer.

With a sinking feeling, I took my information terminal out of my jacket pocket. There, on the screen, was the name I least wanted to see.

"What's wrong?" Mimi asked.

"Your call tone is so irritating," said Elma. "Who's it from?" I put the terminal down for everyone to see. Elma yelped, grimacing openly. The terminal buzzed again.

Mimi's face fell as she read the name. The twins rolled their eyes. Only Tinia had no reaction to the gravity of the situation.

It wasn't a total surprise. There'd been a large-scale pirate attack, and that all but guaranteed she'd show up. I almost canceled the call then and there, but who knew what would happen if I did... I gave up and pressed the "accept" button.

The dining hall holo-display lit up with the image of a blonde woman in a white military uniform. The sword at her hip proudly displayed her status as a noble.

"Good day, Captain Hiro." She smiled broadly. "We meet again."

"Yeah. We sure do, Lieutenant Commander."

Trouble again. No doubt about it. I could feel it in my bones.

Afterword

THANK YOU FOR PICKING UP Volume 9 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! Woo, let's go!

Time to narrate my life to you as usual. Lately, I've gotten into a survival game where you scavenge for supplies in a radioactive region crawling with mutants and bandits, and another game where you can customize a spaceship to fight space pirates and develop your crew. Both of them are what they call "early access" games, meaning they're not finished yet, but I like buying games like this for my PC to help support development! There are more bugs to deal with, of course, but that's just part of the flavor, you know?

I've been playing a new mobile game, too. Post-apocalyptic dystopian setting, cute cyborg girls... Yeah, it's the one you're thinking of. Yeah, the one with the butts. I hope this one lasts longer than games like this typically do. It's hard to get into a game when you're afraid the developer will give up on it.

Okay, enough about me. Let's get to the book.

In this volume, we visit the Leafil System, home of the elves. It's not unusual for Hiro to go on vacation and wind up embroiled in conflict, but this time we also get into his mysterious origins and how he doesn't quite fit into this universe. Yes, interspersed with plenty of flirting between him and the girls.

Also, I revised things to make sure that a certain someone who didn't get enough attention in the web serialization is much more involved with Hiro and his friends. What's that? The cover already spoiled it? Yeah, you got a problem with that? That means this volume has a lot more original content than usual. It also means I missed my deadline in the process... Sorry, editor. I'm really sorry.

This is the part where I get into world-building details that I couldn't fully discuss in the story. This time around, we're talking about elven psionic powers.

All elves are born with latent psionic abilities, but they can't wield them without considerable training. Some races in the *Space Mercenary* universe are able to use their powers from birth; those are called manifest psionic abilities.

Most of the powers that elves possess are what they call elemental abilities. Put simply, they use the matter and energy inherent to the natural world. They can control things like fire, water, wind, and earth, along with the life forces of plants and animals. It's a lot like the offensive and healing magic you might see in other universes: Kafrizzle, Cure, stuff like that. Elven masters of elemental magic can use spells like Kaboom and Thundaga. They can't quite go as far as Meteor, though.

Elves don't have much affinity for powers that influence time, space, or the mind—things like telepathy, teleportation, and telekinesis. That brand of psionic power is a bit more muscle-brained. Knowledge isn't power; *power* is.

These are just a few of the many types of psionic abilities in the *Space Mercenary* universe. There are way more powers than these, but I'll spare you for now. It'd take a whole chapter to tell you about all of them!

Now that I've run my mouth for a while, I think it's time to say goodbye.

Thank you to my manager, K; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of *Space Mercenary*. Most of all, a huge thanks to everyone who bought and read this book.

Let's shoot for Volume 10! C'mon, Volume 10! We can do it!

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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