

REBORN AS A
**SPACE
MERCENARY**

I WOKE UP PILOTING THE
STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL

11



WRITTEN BY
Ryuto

ILLUSTRATED BY
**Tetsuhiro
Nabeshima**

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**"Hon!
Over here!"**

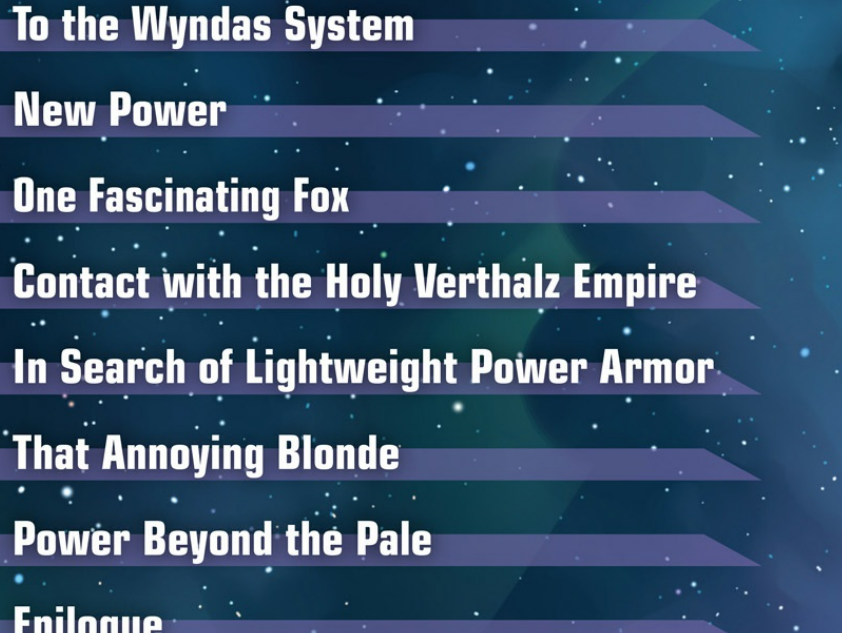
Tina

Wiska

*The twins dress up and invite Hiro on a date
to tell him something. What could it be? ♪*

■■■■

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Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.11

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Prologue

I WOKE UP TO SOMETHING pressing against my cheek.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was a ceiling I'd gotten very used to. I was in my quarters aboard the *Black Lotus*. As for the warmth on both sides of me... *Oh, right. I slept with Tina and Wiska last night, so an arm or leg or something must be pressing my cheek.*

Taking care not to wake up the girls sleeping on either side, I grabbed the thing pushing into my face.

"A foot...?"

Yup, a small foot. *Hmm. Small, but surprisingly calloused. Is that because they always work on their feet? Must be Tina's foot... Man, what a restless sleeper.*

Despite my guess, I heard Tina's voice from my other side. "Mmm...you awake?"

I rolled and saw a sleepy-eyed Tina slide over sluggishly and rest her head on my arm. *That must mean this foot is...*

"Whoa, is that Wis's foot?" Tina chuckled. "She's a real restless sleeper."

"Restless doesn't begin to describe this," I replied. How the hell could someone reverse their head and legs in their sleep? Wiska *seemed* like a practical person, but she was awfully odd sometimes.

"Forget Wis. Mornin', hon."

"Good morning, Tina." I couldn't move my upper arm, since Tina's head rested on it, so I bent my elbow and tried to stroke her hair. *Nope, too far. She's just out of reach. My fingertips can barely graze her head.*

"Nnh. You're too much, hon." Tina smirked and rubbed her face against my shoulder.

What are you, a cat? That's okay, though—since you're cute. Now, it's about

time I got up.

“Ugh. I’m so embarrassed...”

“As ya saw, that was Wis in her natural state.”

“Sis...” Wiska glared resentfully at her twin in the *Black Lotus* dining hall. They sat side by side, eating the same breakfast—a sign of their close relationship.

Next to me, Elma watched them. “You’re all in an awfully good mood this morning.”

Elma must’ve been up late drinking, because she *wasn’t* in a good mood. On top of that, she was eating an unusually light breakfast; she probably felt really hung over. Usually, her breakfast was along the lines of (fake) steak and mashed potatoes.

Mimi sat squarely across from me. “Elma, are you doing okay?” she asked worriedly. She was eating her usual breakfast, a kind of sweet porridge. She’d told me what it was called one time, but I’d immediately forgotten due to the unfamiliarity of the word. I think she called it “kyuke” or something.

“It’s rare to see you in such bad shape this early in the morning,” I mused.

“Yeah, well, the booze I drank last night was rotgut,” Elma retorted. “Just tossing it felt like a waste, so I finished the bottle, but it got me stinking drunk and gave me a wicked hangover to boot... Ugh, my head’s killing me.”

“Head over to the medbay after you eat.”

“Nngh...” Elma groaned and leaned against me.

It’s so bad she can’t even reply properly? Maybe I should help her clear the table and drag her to the medbay myself.

On the other side of the huge dining table, Tina smirked at Elma. “Bad liquor, huh?”

Wiska smiled at Elma too, a look of pity in her eyes.

Elma scowled at Tina's teasing. "What?"

"Nooother. Nothin' at all."

Wiska tried to console her. "Going to the medbay isn't a bad idea, but you should kick back with Hiro in the lounge after you eat," she suggested. "A quiet place to rest and recover would be best for you."

Since I wasn't a total idiot, I knew what Wiska was arranging. I just had to pretend not to notice, then spoil Elma as best I could. "Sure. I wouldn't mind hanging out with Elma."

"Then I'll go train with the simulator in the *Krishna's* cockpit!" Mimi piped up.

"We'll draw up reports and send 'em to the home office," Tina added.

"Yep," Wiska agreed.

Mimi had basically finished operator training, and she'd begun studying to be a sub-pilot. Reading textbooks and stuff was probably an important aspect of that, but hands-on simulator training was more crucial, so she'd spent a lot of her free time in the *Krishna's* cockpit lately.

As for the mechanic twins, Wiska and Tina, they'd been writing reports. Since they'd finished restoring the high-speed combat ship we scored from the Red Flag operation, they were putting together materials on things they'd learned in the process; they'd relay those to their company Space Dwergr.

In short, we were taking things easy today since we were still waiting our turn to use the gateway.

Captain Mary's Singing Crystal had subjected us to what was essentially a terrorist attack between the Leafil System and Eñors System gateway, but we'd survived and made it to our destination in one piece.

When we were ready to leave, we'd accessed the gateway using the license that His Majesty kindly gave us, but that didn't let us go through the gateway right away. A gateway used an enormous amount of energy; after all, it let you travel tens of thousands of light years in the blink of an eye. A lot of legwork

went into using them. Even with His Majesty's direct permission, you couldn't just hop into a gateway at your leisure.

When a gateway was used for travel, it was naturally more efficient to move multiple ships at once than to transport one ship at a time. So either you gathered a specific number of ships going to the same destination, or you waited for a designated time slot. That process also kept people spending money in the Eñors System while they waited. That certainly wouldn't have been the only consideration when they set those rules, but it was a nice bonus.

"Come on," I urged Elma. "Once you're done eating, we'll go relax in the lounge."

"Mm...carry me."

"Yeah, yeah, I will."

Mimi kindly offered to clear our dishes for us. I took her up on that and princess-carried the extremely needy Elma to the lounge, as commanded.

Good grief. You're one demanding princess.

I sat on the big sofa in our spacious lounge and gathered information on my handheld terminal, stroking Elma's hair while she rested her head in my lap. We already knew which system we were headed to, but we didn't have concrete plans just yet for when we got there.

"What're you looking at?" Elma glared up at me.

"Hm? Just checking out high-tech corporations in the Wyndas System." I showed her my terminal screen.

She brushed my arm aside and glared even harder. "Why do you care so much more about your dumb terminal? I'm in your lap!"

"Wow. How adorably annoying."

"Hey, what do you mean annoying?!"

I stroked her hair while she pouted, tossing the terminal aside. If Elma preferred to be a full-on spoiled brat today, I was happy to give her what she wanted.

“You’re right,” I said. “You always give me plenty of attention. Let me return it today.”

“There you go. That’s much better.” Elma’s sudden satisfaction was even more adorable.

Now, what can I do for her? We’ve got plenty of time, so it’s not like I have to be picky.

I tapped my terminal to dim the lounge lights, set up a holo-display, and play a holo-video that replicated forest sights and sounds.

“Wow... Kind of an old-fashioned choice.” Elma rolled her eyes. “Are you going to start growing moss?”

“Look, want me to play Mimi’s death metal playlist instead?”

“Please, no.”

Mimi had wide musical taste and didn’t only listen to metal and rock. A lot of the music she was into seemed strange to me, but that was just how she was; she had unique sensibilities.

“Who cares if this is old-fashioned?” I said. “It works, as long as you can chill out. Sometimes, the most luxurious way to spend time is just hanging out doing nothing in particular.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

After that, we kicked back together, flirting a little. Elma was really cute when she was needy.

Chapter 1: To the Wyndas System

IT TOOK A FEW DAYS before we could finally go to the Wyndas System.

Hm? How'd we spend that time? Well, we didn't have much to do, so we just hung out and had fun aboard the *Black Lotus*. After needing to keep on our guard for a while, we used the wait to relax.

Anyway, moving on...

The Wyndas System was surprisingly close to the Imperial capital. It was the Empire's largest shipbuilding base, with a massive shipyard. The Imperial Fleet's strategic headquarters were there, so it was one of the Grakkan Empire's most important systems in both an economic and a military sense.

Geographically—yeah, I know we're talking outer space, but bear with me—this star system contained lots of asteroid belts and planets with a wealth of resources. It was also connected via hyperlane to many other systems that produced mineral resources and versatile Rare Metals that served as catalysts. On top of that, it was blessed with several habitable planets. Since it was also fairly close to the Imperial capital, development here had been prioritized.

I gazed at the Wyndas System info shown on the lounge holo-display. "It's the fleet's strategic HQ, huh?" I muttered to myself.

Mimi and Elma were on the couch with me, the former seated and the latter lying down. They grinned wryly while they discussed a certain nuisance.

"Think we'll run into her again?"

"Given the timing, I wouldn't be surprised."

Which nuisance were they discussing? Lieutenant Colonel Serena, of course. Fate sure brought us together a lot. Just days earlier, we'd joined Serena's operation against Red Flag. It wouldn't be much of a surprise if she and her fleet

were spending a few weeks here in the Wyndas System to resupply and perform maintenance after the operation.

“Well, no use worrying about it now. If we run into her again, we’ll just shrug it off.”

“True. I don’t think it’s an ‘if,’ though.”

“I can feel it coming.”

“How many times have we had this exchange?” I chuckled.

How did we run into Serena so often in this vast universe? At this point, I had to consider it fate. Still, we weren’t guaranteed to see her this time. “Elma, this trip is all about your new ship. Any goals for it?”

“Hmm...a few, but it’ll be your decision in the end, won’t it?”

“Fair enough. I have a general image in mind, but a lot of things we won’t know until we’re looking at ships.”

“You’re not wrong. And now that we have Tina and Wiska, I’ll want their opinions when it comes to maintenance.”

“Interesting!” Mimi chimed in. “I’m studying ships, but there’s still so much I’m in the dark about.”

“When it comes to ships, specs aren’t everything,” I told her. “A ship’s weight, center of gravity, and thruster positions all affect handling. It’s a good idea to experience different models in the simulator, but once you get some experience under your belt, you’ll need to fly the real thing, Mimi.”

We had several reasons to visit the Wyndas System, but picking out a new ship for Elma was chief among them.

I’d have loved to buy a craft for Mimi too, in order to be ahead of the game, but the *Black Lotus*’s hangar only fit two small ships. If we wanted Mimi piloting a vessel one day, we’d need to look into a new mothership as well. That wasn’t urgent, though.

“We aren’t just getting a ship, are we?”

“No. I also want lightweight power armor I can wield a monosword with. I’d rather never have to use it, frankly...but with us, you never know.”

Memories of landing in the harsh environment of a partially terraformed planet and fighting horrific biological monsters with my own two hands came to mind. Back then, we’d been on a mission targeting a group of Imperial nobles who’d undergone bodily augmentation, and our strategy required an equally augmented noble—or someone else, like me—to fight them.

I seriously hadn’t wanted to do it, but given my position at the time, I couldn’t have turned down my client Serena. That forced me to land on the planet alongside the Imperial Fleet’s Pirate-Hunting Unit. When we got down there, we learned that dangerous bioweapons were running wild, and some mysterious technology had turned our targets into even stronger biological freaks. It had been a nightmare, and I never wanted to do that again, whoever asked me. No matter what.

That prayer was all well and good, but ending up in a similar situation was far from unlikely. So since we had the money and storage space for power armor, I’d decided to find a lightweight set that would let me handle a sword in order to have the best of both worlds.

That said, I didn’t know whether I’d find power armor that suited my needs. Most Imperial aristocrats—especially those commonly referred to as “sword supremacists”—had high-spec bionic and cybernetic augmentations, so they didn’t require power armor. To be fair, I couldn’t protest if you said that I likewise had the strength and mobility to stand up to foes without power armor.

Another concern was that mere power armor plating couldn’t withstand the “monosword” blades nobles used, which tapered to the width of a single molecule. Monoswords were sharp enough to cut right through battleship plating, so run-of-the-mill power armor was like tissue paper to them.

“I hope they’ll have something useful,” I said, “but I won’t hold my breath.”

“You might be better off unarmored anyway,” Elma joked.

“Master Hiro is the person that’s likeliest to be true of,” Mimi added.

“I’m not that ridiculous... Well, okay,” I conceded. “Guess I can’t deny that.”

After all, I did have the power to slow time down—or speed it up, just for me—when I held my breath. According to the elf chieftain Miriam, that might be some kind of psionic capability, basically a superpower, but they hadn’t known the details. As for *why* I could do that, I had no idea. According to the elf, though, I had incredible latent potential for such powers.

They’d tried awakening those dormant powers, but I didn’t *feel* any difference. At one point, some kind of shield had come up to deflect lasers fired at the *Krishna*, but I hadn’t used it consciously, so I couldn’t replicate it. It sure would be convenient as hell if I could deflect lasers at will, though.

The only change I’d noticed was that my intuition was oddly sharp lately. Maybe I’d just gotten more sensitive to presences. Soon enough, I might be able to dodge attacks before they happened, like the Universal Century’s Newtypes.

“Master, we will soon begin traveling via gateway,” Mei announced from the *Black Lotus* cockpit.

“Roger that. I’ll leave the ship in your capable hands.”

“Yes, Master. Thank you.”

The holo-display showing info on the Wyndas System now displayed the giant gateway. *Man, those things are so enormous, they drive your sense of scale crazy. That’s about as big as the Mother Crystal we destroyed a while back. No, maybe even bigger. It’s hard to tell. But no two ways about it—it’s huge.*

“Beginning entry.”

Light gathered between the pair of gigantic structures that formed the gateway. Space seemed to distort. A gateway was apparently some kind of

controlled artificial wormhole. I didn't know exactly how it worked, but going through that distorted space would instantly teleport us to a spot thousands of light years away. *Doesn't matter how it works, as long as we can use it!*

The *Black Lotus* entered the artificial wormhole along with the other ships going through in the same group as us. It was time to visit a totally new world.

"Wow. This is incredible. Look at all those huge colonies!" exclaimed Mimi.

"It's even more impressive that they all have shipyards attached," I agreed. "Watching traffic swarm around them is almost hilarious."

"The Imperial capital system had lots of traffic, but the Wyndas System is even busier." Elma murmured. She gazed at the lounge's large holo-display, which showed information on the star system and data the *Black Lotus*'s sensors had picked up. "Takes me back."

"Takes you back? You mean you've been here before?"

"When I first started mercenary work, this was my base." Elma shrugged slightly. "Until my brother's investigators got here, anyway."

Makes sense. This system is close enough to the capital to reach without a gateway, and given all the colonies and the traffic going to and fro, it's easy to blend into the crowd. If you managed to change your name, score a new ship, and work as a mercenary without giving up any personal info, it'd be virtually impossible for anyone to track you down.

"You were smart for a newbie," I mused.

"Yeah. I had a good blueprint to follow."

"Oh? You mean Mimi's grandma's...?"

"My grandma's stories?"

Mimi's grandmother was the current Emperor's little sister. After she turned fifteen and reached legal adulthood, she'd prepared a small ship in secret and

fled her life as royalty. She hid her identity, evaded Imperial pursuit, and performed great exploits as a mercenary. Novels and other works based on her experiences were all over the place, serving as a sort of religious canon for runaway little girls—including a certain member of our crew.

“Most people just dream. Only a handful take action, like me.”

“Rarer still, you took action and *succeeded*.”

“Yup. Even today, one or two young noble girls run away from the capital every year. Most end up dragged back by their family—or worse.”

“Worse...” Mimi looked distressed as she imagined what Elma was implying.

I didn't blame Elma for being vague. Nobody wanted to hear detailed accounts of noble girls being led astray and landing in a bad situation, or ending up even worse off after pirates destroyed or captured their ships.



If the girls' noble families learned about those events, though, I imagine they'd use their massive assets and power to put the culprits through far worse. *Sure hope I never wind up in that situation.*

While Elma, Mimi, and I chatted, watching Mei pilot the ship, one exhausted-looking Tina arrived in the lounge with Wiska in tow. "Aaagh...I'm beat." The twins had been holed up in their room for days writing reports, but it seemed their pencil-pushing was finished. Tina trudged over and collapsed in my lap. "Finally done. Coo over me, hon!"

"Yeah, yeah. Good work." I stroked her hair. *Wow, it's extra silky. I bet she just got out of the bath. For all this feigned weakness, I'm pretty sure she had the energy to clean up before she came in.*

"Sis, please!"

I beckoned to Wiska, who'd been behind Tina, and petted her as well. "You did great too, Wiska."

She laughed. "Thanks."

It seemed like they'd probably *both* just gotten out of the bath—not that there'd be any point mentioning that.

"So, where we goin'?" Tina asked.

"Oh, did I forget to mention? First, we'll head to the Wyndas Tertius colony to stop by the Space Dwergr office. Wow—'Wyndas Tertius' is a bit of a tongue twister."

"Yep," Tina replied earnestly.

If I tried saying "the Wyndas Tertius colony" three times fast, I bet I'd bite my tongue. At any rate, that was the third colony in the Wyndas System. Wyndas Prime was an Imperial Fleet anchorage, so it was effectively a military colony. Wyndas Secundus collected and distributed ore mined from asteroid belts throughout the system, along with materials imported from other star systems. Wyndas Tertius was a trading colony, home to private shipwrights and other

businesses.

There were others too, Wyndas Quartus and Quintus, which were home to yet more shipyards owned by private manufacturers. However, I was confident we could look after all our business just fine on Tertius alone. Even when it came time to buy a ship, we could order from any of those colonies from Tertius. After all, communication networks could extend throughout a system effortlessly.

“That means we’ll head into the office as soon as we arrive,” Wiska said, seemingly thinking about something. We were planning to sell Space Dwergr the small high-speed combat ship we’d put together, which would require Tina and Wiska to be our go-betweens.

“We’ll come with you to make sure they don’t give you a raw deal,” I told her. “Not that I don’t trust you to negotiate, but I doubt they’d hold back just because they know you.”

“I think you’re right,” agreed Mimi, our resident commerce expert. “Dwarven merchants are wily. We’ll need to be careful.”

Before leaving the Leafil System, as usual, we’d used Willrose family and Rosé Clan connections to procure local products—mainly fresh fruits and veggies, meat, clothing made from natural materials, spirit silver, and the like. Those were all luxuries in outer space; they’d sell for high prices at trading colonies.

“Make sure you don’t get a raw deal on those Leafil specialties either,” I warned Mimi.

“I’ll be very careful.”

I didn’t expect the stuff in the *Black Lotus* cargo hold to completely fund Elma’s new ship, but I thought we’d be able to cover our stay and have money left over. I definitely wanted Mimi to keep doing her best with this commerce stuff.

The *Black Lotus* reached Wyndas Tertius without issue. After a short wait, we were allowed to dock.

“Great piloting as always, Mei.”

“Thank you, Master.” Mei’s bearing was as flawless as any maid’s, as usual.

We’d already arranged an appointment at Space Dwergr, so we planned to alight and go straight there together. After all, the *Black Lotus* wouldn’t have room for Elma’s new ship until we sold Space Dwergr the salvaged ship. Our priorities were first to unload that ship on Space Dwergr, then to buy Elma’s craft, and then to look for my new power armor. If we couldn’t find a suit here, I didn’t mind checking other systems.

“Aren’t you tired?” I asked. “I guess that’s an odd thing to ask you.”

“I am not, but thank you. I am fortunate to have someone so concerned about my well-being.”

“I guess... I’d really be happier if you asked for things once in a while.”

“I will consider that,” Mei replied with a faint smile.

Tina interrupted us, grumbling, “Ugh...what a pain in the rear.” She’d made her reluctance to go into Space Dwergr’s office very clear.

“Don’t be like that. Come on, Sis, buck up.” Wiska smacked her butt.

“Eep!” Although Tina seemed perfectly happy doing her usual work, she always hated visiting the office.

“So, we’ll go to Space Dwergr first. Then what?” I said.

“Should we look for a ship there?” Mimi asked.

“Nah. Their small high-speed combat ships are a little, uh...”

I’d flown their combat prototype once, but even for a prototype, it hadn’t seemed promising. Space Dwergr’s ships typically had more cargo space and plating than other ships of their class, but they lacked mobility, so I’d steer clear of that company for a fast, maneuverable small ship. I mean, Space Dwergr

didn't even *offer* a small ship I'd consider high-speed.

"Sis, he's disrespecting our employer!"

"Can't blame him. We know Space Dwergr ain't no good at that stuff."

"Maintenance is important too," I said to the twins. "So, when it's time to choose, we'll need your input."

"Sneaky."

"If the company found out, we'd get chewed out, or even fired."

The two grinned wryly. Fair enough—their bosses *would* probably tell them off for lacking faith in their own products.

"Okay, looks like we're all ready. Let's go—"

⟨*Found you!*⟩

"Huh?" A voice had suddenly echoed in my mind. *What is that? Do I feel...joy? Yeah, definitely joy. Why exactly is my mind suddenly joyful?*

"Is something wrong?" Mimi stared at me in concern. Everyone else was watching as well, apparently confused.

"I don't know. I feel like I just heard...a weird voice. Did I imagine it?"

"Uh, are you okay, Hiro? Have you been sleeping enough?" Elma looked genuinely worried. Rather than assuming I was joking, she seemed to think something was genuinely mentally wrong with me.

"I must just have imagined it. If it happens again, I'll rest or find a doctor."

"You sure? Okay, then..." Elma kindly left it at that.

Just then, I felt an intimidating aura behind me. *No, not so much intimidating as similar to physical pressure. It's soft and gentle, though.*

"Okay, Mei," I said, "calm down. I'm fine, okay? Look, it's almost time for our appointment."

"...Understood." The pressure on my back stopped. I could tell I'd been mere

seconds from getting bear-hugged from behind.

I'd told everyone that I was fine, but that joyful sensation had clearly been abnormal. It seemed certain that trouble awaited at this colony.

Either way, it was time to hurry to Space Dwergr. As I'd told Mei, our appointment was fast approaching.

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Wiska, the one who contacted you."

"I'm Tina. Here's my ID."

"Thank you."

When we visited Space Dwergr's Wyndas System branch, it bore the same crappy signage as the last branch I'd seen. The rest of us hung back and watched while Tina and Wiska went to the reception desk. Watching two women who resembled little girls have such a...formal...conversation with the small, bulky dude at the counter was kind of funny. All of them were well and truly adults, but they looked like kids playing house.

"Is that the owner of the ship?"

"Yep," said Tina. "It belongs to my man right here, Captain Hiro. This guy's got a platinum rank and a crazy medal called a Gold Star, awarded direct from the Imperial family. He's a real up-and-coming merc and a hero of the Empire."

"He also has a noble title," Wiska added. "So please be respectful."

"Of course. And I understand you're visiting today for negotiations?" The receptionist dwarf stole a glance at me. Space Dwergr already knew what we were here about, since Tina and Wiska had contacted them in advance.

Before long, a female dwarf in some kind of business suit appeared. "Thank you for waiting. Right this way, please."

I thought this every time, but beyond the bearded, brawny male dwarves, seeing women who looked like grade-schoolers wearing business suits was just

uncanny. It almost felt like I was seeing cosplay. But, though dwarven women were small, you could spot some attractive curves if you looked closely. What a very odd race they were. One of the mysteries of life, I guess.

“Like that outfit, hon?”

“Want *us* to wear business suits sometime?”

“Shut up, you two,” I hushed them. They were whispering, but I was terrified someone might hear.

“Hmm?”

“Ooh. I’ve never worn anything like that before.”

I hear you girls whispering behind my back. Look, we need to be serious. I’m sorry for sneaking a peek because I thought nobody would notice me looking at that lady—but, please, just stop now.

After walking for a few minutes, we boarded something like an elevator. Eventually, the dwarves escorted us into a luxuriously furnished reception room—or maybe more of a conference room.

“Pardon me,” our guide said to the people inside. “I’ve come with Mr. Hiro and his entourage.”

“Thanks,” replied one of the dwarves seated in the room, presumably a Space Dwergr employee. “Bring everyone drinks, would you?”

“Understood.”

The employee sitting at the table gestured to us. “Please have a seat here.”

I obeyed and sat down right in the middle, facing several Space Dwergr personnel on the opposite side. Elma and Mimi sat to my left, Tina and Wiska on my right, and Mei stood behind me as usual.

“I am merely a servant, so I will take the liberty of standing,” Mei stated.

“Is that, um...all right?” a male dwarf on the other side of the table asked me. I nodded in assent. Whatever Mei wanted was fine with me.

Before long, the woman who'd been asked to bring drinks returned with glasses and a jug. She began pouring beverages for everyone. *Hmm? That looks like ice water with fruit slices in it. Is it some kind of juice or lemonade? If they use real fruit, it must cost an arm and a leg.*

"Are we good to go?" I asked. "When it comes to this stuff, I prefer to get right to business."

"Of course. Allow me to introduce everyone. My name is Argatt, and I will represent Space Dwergr in these negotiations. Over here is Theresa from the engineering department."

Upon Mr. Argatt's introduction, Theresa bowed silently. Argatt was... Well, I couldn't figure out male dwarves' ages. His voice sounded like he was in his thirties or forties, but that might've been wrong. Theresa was a woman, but female dwarves' ages were tough to gauge too. Judging from her calm demeanor, she was probably older than Tina and Wiska.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Hiro, a mercenary. I don't care about that nobility stuff, so just treat me like any other merc."

I probably wasn't a very important customer to Space Dwergr. That might've been different if I'd bought dozens of ships or completed a bunch of requests for them; I'd purchased one cutting-edge mothership at a hefty discount, providing operational data in return, but that was it.

"Please, Mr. Hiro. You're a valuable customer to us. Thanks to your exploits, sales of our mothership model rose, and the data accumulated on our new model has resulted in an astounding number of orders. Using your mothership as a gunship was a truly novel idea. We have plans to create an offensive transport ship by maintaining firepower and increasing cargo capacity—"

"Ahem!" Theresa cleared her throat to interrupt Argatt. Apparently, that was something Space Dwergr didn't want us knowing about.

Argatt chuckled apologetically. "Sorry. You wanted to get right to business. Our engineering department has already analyzed the reports Wiska and Tina

provided.”

“The data is fascinating,” said Theresa. “You mentioned that you’d sell us both the restored ship and the surplus wreckage?”

“That’s the plan,” I replied. “I think we both stand to benefit.”

We’d be happy to unload a ship of dubious origin, and Space Dwergr would get insight into technology previously beyond them. Even if the ship’s manufacturer probed into how Space Dwergr had gotten their hands on that tech, they couldn’t do anything about the situation but cry themselves to sleep. As an added bonus to Space Dwergr, the ship’s control-system software was in perfect condition.

Of course, the manufacturer had put multiple layers of security in place on the ships to prevent the tech from being analyzed easily, but a ship stolen by Red Flag would have already been unlocked by the pirates. A machine intelligence advisor could crack it quickly, allowing Space Dwergr to make leaps and bounds in their high-speed small ship research. Like I said, a deal for both sides.

“Let’s talk price,” I said.

“Well, we’d like to hear your offer first.”

“I’m asking how much the ship and wreckage are worth to you. Making the starting offer will be advantageous to you, won’t it?”

“I’m afraid it depends. Why don’t we suggest a price at the same time? If our offer is higher, we’ll purchase the ship instantly. If yours is higher, we can negotiate from there.”

“Are you sure? This sounds like my chance to gouge you for all you’re worth,” I joked.

“H-ha ha ha! That’s even scarier coming from *you*.” Sweat formed on Argatt’s brow.

What? Could you stop acting like pissing me off would be the worst thing in

the universe? I don't think I'm that big a complainer or a difficult customer. It's your fault I got hit by the Wiska Fastball in the Vlad System. Same goes for the media mobbing at the capital.

"Okay. Want to name a price at the same time, then?" I agreed.

"Gladly. Now..." Argatt put up three fingers. He folded one down, followed by another, and then...

"Seven and a half million."

"Twelve million."

The first offer was mine, while Argatt made the latter suggestion. *Wow, that's a lot more than I expected.* "I'm a little surprised," I said. "But if that's your offer, I'm happy to take it."

"It is. There you have it. Oh—and we'd like Wiska and Tina for a few days during the information handoff. Is that acceptable?"

"I don't mind, but you'd better stick to an eight-hour day while they're here helping you. Last time we handed them off to Space Dwergr, you worked them to the bone. It affected their work for *us*." Every time we saw the twins after they'd visited Space Dwergr, they were pale and haggard. I wasn't about to let that happen again. "They may technically be employees here, but they're my friends. If anything happens... You get what I mean, right?"

"H-ha ha ha... Of course."

"I'm not telling you to give them special treatment, but I do think of them as part of my crew. I want you to keep that in mind." I heavily implied this universe's somewhat-gross custom. To be fair, it was true that the twins and I *were* in a sexual relationship now. *Oh. I'll add one more thing.* "By the way, girls, since we're selling the ship for twelve mil, your cut is 3.6 million. Split it evenly."

"Huh?!" three people gasped at once. Two were Tina and Wiska, and the third was Theresa.

"Um, did you say...3.6 million?" Theresa asked.

“Yeah. I promised them thirty percent of the proceeds, after all.” I shrugged.

Argatt’s jaw had dropped so much it looked ready to fall off. He must’ve been really taken aback. As for Tina and Wiska... *Yeah, I see those thunderstruck stares.*

“Hon, did ya have to say that out loud?”

“Money is power, girls. If anything goes wrong, we’ll have buying power on our side. Besides, this makes it clear how serious I am about Space Dwergr treating you two well, right?”

“Well... I suppose.” Wiska heaved a sigh.

Don’t worry, we’ll only be dealing with the Wyndas System branch for a few days. Maybe you’ll be a little less comfortable here, but we’ve at least given them a strong impression that mistreating you would be dangerous.

“Okay,” I said, “then that’s that. You can discuss transporting the ship during the twins’ shift, all right?”

“Yes...”

We ironed out details with Argatt, though he looked like he’d had his soul sucked out. We seemed to have worked things out with Space Dwergr for the time being. I had to wonder why they’d been willing to put such a large price tag on the ship, but I was fine with it; it only benefited us. I’d be happy to use all that cash to buy Elma a ship.

Chapter 2: New Power

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY SELLING OFF the restored foreign ship we'd salvaged from Red Flag, we headed straight to the shipyard. The twins joined us, whispering to each other.

"Think his threats worked?"

"I'd say Argatt was mostly stunned by the 3.6 million Ener."

I'd expected Tina and Wiska to stay at the office and get to work, but apparently it would take Space Dwergr time to assign analysts to review the twins' report. So for today, they'd continue their usual work as our mechanics.

I didn't know if it just took Space Dwergr a while to redistribute personnel, hand over work, and allocate tasks, or if my threats had been effective. Either way, I was happy to have my mechanics on hand while choosing a new ship. Since they were in the industry, they might be able to advise us from a perspective that complemented me and Elma's point of view as mercs.

"We're not visiting the shipwrights' branch offices?" Mimi asked.

"We could do that someplace like the Vlad System, where Space Dwergr's the clear top dog," explained Elma. "But in more competitive markets like this, going to shipyards is faster." In *Stella Online*, you accessed shipyards through a colony communication menu from the comfort of your ship, but buying ships in reality naturally involved moving around.

Hm? You want to know why we can't just do it from aboard our ship using holo-messages? That wouldn't be impossible, but apparently it's rare for people to buy ships that way.

Tina and Wiska switched topics to the ship we'd be buying Elma.

"Hmm...considering Elma's agility, we'll definitely want a mobile ship, won't

we?”

“You betcha. I mean, that’s one reason people get small ships in the first place.”

“The problem is losing firepower in the process. Output’s a concern too.”

Like Tina said, most people shopping for small ships wanted speed and maneuverability. The eternal problem was how much firepower you could load onto the ship. The small generators that fit small ships had limited energy output, much of which had to go toward mobility—that is, thrusters and boosters. That left you with the headache-inducing question of how to optimize your remaining firepower using armaments like laser cannons.

“Making up for firepower with strong ammo and explosives is always an option,” Tina mused.

“Multi-cannons, seeker missiles, and torpedo launchers take less energy, but their weight...”

“Yeah. That’s a real weakness in small ships too. You gotta consider the weight of the weapons themselves, and ammo’s a whole other problem.”

“Funny how we don’t have to worry about that with the *Krishna*.” Elma glared at me.

“Whatever,” I brushed her off with a shrug.

The *Krishna* was indeed almost unfairly high-spec. It was at the top of the small-ship size range, but its special generator’s output exceeded that of even medium ships.

As such, I could equip powerful shields, attain plenty of maneuverability using the *Krishna*’s powerful thrusters, and even have power to spare for four heavy laser cannons. Of course, the *Krishna* was only overwhelmingly strong for a small ship. Its shield performance was nothing compared to an Imperial Fleet battleship or cruiser; in a head-on fight, it would lose outright. The *Krishna* was powerful, yes, but far from invincible.

“What kind of ship would you like, Elma?”

“Well, function is important,” Elma mused. “But so is form.”

“Is it?” Tina cocked her head.

“I think I get that,” agreed Wiska.

Like Tina, Mimi seemed skeptical. “I don’t know...”

I preferred function over form, myself, but I didn’t have it in me to disagree with Elma. Honestly, I’d probably give up a smidge of functionality for something that looked cool.

“What do you think, hon?” Tina asked me.

“It’s not my style to focus on looking flashy,” I replied. “But forcing yourself to use something you think is ugly is bad for morale.”

“Kinda half-baked answer.”

“That’s just how it is. People who like the look of their ship are more motivated to keep it from getting damaged. But if they don’t care how it looks, they might get sloppy because they don’t mind it getting scratched.”

“Hunh. When you put it that way, yeah.” Tina seemed convinced.

You really couldn’t laugh off people who looked at a fully assembled, painted ship and thought, *Damn, that’s cool. Is that the best ship ever, or what?* The owner’s feelings toward their ship were crucial.

Continuing to chat about ships, we walked—well, actually, took the colony transport system—to the shipyard.

The sight amazed Tina. “Whoa. This is wild,” she declared.

Frankly, I was a little surprised myself. It was a much tidier place than I’d expected.

“It kind of reminds me of the *Black Lotus* lounge,” Mimi noted.

“Oh! I thought it looked familiar. Maybe that’s it,” Wiska agreed.

There were well-crafted couches, long tables, decorative plants, terrariums, holo-displays showing spaceship ads, and more, in a space that did indeed have a design similar to the Black *Lotus*'s interior. It also kind of reminded me of auto shows I'd seen on the news on Earth.

"So, the company booths are in the back?" I quipped.

"Right," said Elma. "We browse the ships on display back there, then negotiate up here. Want to search from end to end?"

"Hmm...I think we should discuss exactly what kind of ship we're looking for first, don't you?"

"Yeah. Good idea. Want to talk about that right now? I've been thinking it over for a while."

We decided to talk in the lounge before visiting the corporation booths in the back.

After we sat down and ordered drinks, Elma started things off. "A ship that's kind of fast, with decent firepower...that wouldn't suit our crew, would it?"

"Solo work aside, I don't think so. Not while fighting as a team," I agreed.

The others cocked their heads in unison. They seemed unable to tell what we were getting at.

"Uh...wanna spoon-feed us what you mean?" Tina asked.

"Basically, to stick to our current approach, we'll need a ship design that clearly makes up for our shortcomings and bolsters our strengths. And if we want to change up our style with a new ship, that ship will need to suit our new style."

"Okay..." Mimi still seemed confused.

Tina and Wiska were convinced, though—or, rather, they understood. That came down to the difference between the twins, who'd spent years working as

ship mechanics, and Mimi, who'd never been involved in such matters until she came aboard.

"Our current pirate-hunting style is basically bait fishing, right? We use the *Black Lotus* as a lure," said Elma. "When pirates swoop in, the *Krishna* ambushes them while the *Black Lotus* deploys its weapons, forming a pincer attack."

"That's right." Mimi nodded.

It sounded simple spelled out like that. But if the *Black Lotus* was revealed as a decoy, or the *Krishna* was spotted before we pincer our target, it ruined the strategy. So we needed to get creative sometimes. Anyway, moving on...

"As things stand, when we let a target slip, it's because they immediately turned tail and ran."

"Yeah. Now that you mention it, that's the way it usually unfolds."

We could pursue one or two ships with ease, but if four or five tried to escape at once, sinking them all was hard. They tended to scatter when they fled—almost as if they'd agreed in advance to do so. I mean...they probably *did*.

"So, if we want to make up for our shortcomings, we should consider a ship that excels at pursuit. Or, to bolster our strengths, we want a ship with good range and firepower to shoot down pirate ships before they get away."

"I get it now!"

"Cool," I replied. "Now that Mimi's up to speed, we have to figure out exactly which direction we'd like to go in. If we want affordable pursuit ability and firepower, I bet a missile ship full of missile pods would be a good option."

"But that'd have a bottleneck," Tina objected. "Missiles are physical ammunition, so we'd need to consider that added weight. And it wouldn't be as useful in long battles."

"On the other hand, missile pods use less energy, so we could redirect power to the thrusters," Wiska said. "That could ensure surprising mobility."

“Uh-huh,” said Elma. “And each missile fired would reduce the ship’s weight, making it even faster.”

That was logical; as you fired missiles and lightened your load, the ship’s acceleration would improve. Once you’d fired all your missiles, you could even purge the pods...not that you *would*, even if that sounded cool as hell, since those things cost a bundle. If you purged them mid-battle, you’d launch them too far into some corner of space to recover. Yeah, you could insure them, but losing missile pods in *every* fight would bankrupt you. The price of missiles themselves was already exorbitant.

“Is operational cost your main criteria?”

“Yeah. Fighting for longer stretches of time isn’t as much of a concern, since we don’t really enter multiple long battles in a row. And the new ship could always just resupply at the *Black Lotus* between fights. Like Mimi said, the big problem would be affording seeker missiles.”

“Those things add up.” Elma rested her cheek in one hand and sighed.

Common seeker missiles went for around five to eight hundred Ener a pop. Converted to Japanese yen that was cheap as hell, sure, simply thanks to the cost reductions possible through replicators, efficient asteroid mining, and mercenary guild subsidies.

The main thing reducing the cost was replicators, which created solid objects—even complex guidance technology—with the touch of a button, as long as you had the base data and materials. That didn’t mean you could replicate anything willy-nilly, though. You couldn’t replicate things without base data, and not all materials replicated well. Basically, replicators weren’t perfect.

“Yup. Five to eight hundred Ener might not sound like much on its face,” I said, “but if you fire twenty missiles in one battle, that’s ten to sixteen thousand Ener. Keep that up, and you’re flushing your profits down the drain.”

Seeker missiles cost a fraction of the price of anti-ship reactive missiles, which were 500,000 Ener each. Still, that didn’t mean you could be trigger-happy with

them. You could fire as many as you wanted in a war you needed to survive, or a life-or-death fight you were desperate to win—but merc work was a business.

“Also, blowing away a pirate ship with seeker missiles damages the target’s hull badly. As often as not, it totally destroys the laser cannons, multi-cannons, thrusters, and other external equipment.”

“Costs ya money *and* screws your income, huh?” said Tina.

“When you put it that way, missiles sound like nothing but trouble.” Mimi grumbled, brow furrowed.

“Nah. Missiles are strong. They’re great at saturating shields when they detonate—a direct hit can blow away plating and seriously damage a hull. Damaging external elements like weapons and thrusters reduces enemy combat capabilities too. You really don’t want to *take* a hit from a missile, so I always try to dodge or intercept them.”

“Just so you know,” Elma added, “only a select handful of weirdos like Hiro can slip through a hail of seeker missiles like it’s nothing. Some ships aren’t even fast enough to shake off seeker missiles, and lasers alone can’t intercept a big group of them. Even if you’re okay with letting a few bounce off your shields, a small ship’s shields are dead and down if just two missiles strike it.”

“Dead and down” was slang for fully saturated shielding. A ship with disabled shields was a sitting duck. The *Krishna*’s expensive plating could take one or two direct seeker missile hits, but more was dangerous. Most small ships had light hulls to maximize speed, so taking a seeker missile without shields meant death.

“Hmm. I see. Are we going for a missile ship, then?” Mimi asked.

“Maybe,” I sighed. “In terms of range, power, and restraining ability, they’re kind of perfect for the job.”

“When seeker missiles are after you, starting an FTL drive is a bad idea. It could be a good call to leave attackers to the *Krishna* while I use seeker missiles

to stop the enemy in their tracks. Of course, we'd put a few laser cannons in as permanent arms..." Elma began to explain the strategy in-depth, but the drinks we'd ordered arrived mid-sentence, so we took a quick break.

"While you were talking, I thought of a question," Mimi said, then came out with an astute inquiry. "Is there a reason we need a *small* ship?"

"Good question. Actually, you're right; we don't absolutely *need* to get a small ship," I confirmed.

Elma wasn't surprised by that, as far as I could tell, so I figured she'd been thinking the same thing. On the other hand, the mechanics looked confused.

"The *Black Lotus* hangar is for small ships, ain't it?" asked Tina. "I dunno if you'll fit a medium one in there."

"But what if we don't assume the ship will be maintained in the *Black Lotus*?" Wiska responded. "After all, if we fill its hangar with small ships, we won't have space to restore looted ships like we did this time."

"Ooh—I get it. Any time we wanted to clear space to restore another ship, one of those two small ships would have to leave the hangar and follow us anyway. A medium one *would* be better for that, huh?"

The exchange seemed to help them catch up with our train of thought, and Mimi's face also betrayed a sudden understanding. I assumed she'd only thought as far as wondering if we needed to buy a small ship, without identifying specifics of why not, like the mechanics had.

"Okay," I said. "Wanna discuss adding a *medium* ship to our little fleet?"

With that, the subject changed.

"A medium ship has obvious advantages," I said, kicking off this round of discussion. "We could get something with way more firepower and durability than a small ship."

"Yep. Also, small ships are typically built to be agile, but there are a wide range of medium ship models that can specialize in high speed or heavy

firepower,” Elma added. “Even ships of the same model can differ wildly depending on how they’re customized.”

“But ain’t that useless for your pursuit plan? Even if ya go heavy on speed, a medium ship won’t beat fast small craft.”

“Specs-wise, you’re right. Still, a medium ship can equip weapons with much greater range and power. Handled well, I bet a medium ship could cover a wider range than a small one, right?”

“If only it could use an anti-FTL trap,” Mimi mused.

“Those are military equipment. Only specialized ships can use them.”

An anti-FTL trap was a powerful interdictor that affected wide areas, forcefully stopping a ship’s FTL drive and rendering it impossible to reactivate. Unfortunately, they were extremely energy inefficient, so only specific otherwise-defenseless military ships could use them for long periods. Because they were so specialized, they weren’t available to the general public.

“Still, they’re top-class detainment tech,” Elma remarked. “And it’s not like we’d have to have one on all the time. Do you think there’s similar equipment on the market?”

“Yeah, operating one briefly would be enough, wouldn’t it?” I acknowledged. “If energy consumption was a problem, could we power it with a capacitor, or some other high-capacity energy-storage device?”

“It might be technically possible, hon, but you’ll have a hard time findin’ one on the market. Imagine if pirates got their hands on those.”

Wiska shuddered. “It would be awful if pirates with anti-FTL traps attacked a civilian ship.”

Pirates adopting anti-FTL traps would be a nightmare for their victims. They’d only need three minutes to destroy a civilian ship’s main thrusters and leave it utterly helpless.

“Maybe that’s exactly why they aren’t circulated on the market,” Mimi

suggested.

“Well, no point pining for things that aren’t available,” I shrugged. “As for the drawbacks of a medium ship, well, running cost comes to mind.”

“Maintenance would cost more than on a small ship,” Elma agreed. “And we’d have to dock a medium ship separately from the *Black Lotus*, which would mean higher fees.”

“In terms of specs, it’d be slower,” Mimi added. “And dodging enemy fire would be harder, right?”

“Yeah, especially because it’d be an easier target than a small ship. The extra mass would make it tougher to maneuver, and we couldn’t take sudden evasive action. We’d just have to accept that.”

“But you could install more powerful shields, couldn’t you?” Mimi asked. “Between that and the extra firepower, couldn’t a medium ship overwhelm pirates with ease?”

“Yeah, a fully equipped medium ship can trounce the average souped-up civilian ship anytime. The problem is when pirates equip seeker missiles.”

“Pirates aren’t all stupid,” Elma reminded us. “A lot ready seeker missiles that could sink a medium ship. A medium ship’s multilayered shield can take five or six direct seeker missile hits, but by the time ten or twenty hit, it’s in big trouble.”

“If you get a barrage of missiles on your ass,” I added, “you have to switch to using lasers to intercept them, which gives pirates even more breathing room.”

“Then they turn tail while you’re busy defending yourself. But with the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* on hand, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

The pirates’ strategy might suppress a medium ship on its own, but we didn’t need to worry about it, since two very capable vessels would accompany ours. If one of our ships received focused fire from a pirate, the other two could obliterate the attacker. Running away was still going to be the pirates’ most

annoying strategy.

While we discussed this, two figures approached us from the back of the shipyard where the booths were. I glanced up to see a man who looked like an executive and a beautiful woman—or, rather, a female android—who seemed to be his companion.

“Need something from us?” I asked.

“I apologize for intruding on your conversation. My name is Autumn, and I’m from Ideal Starways. This is my companion, Milly.” After the man introduced himself and his friend, the android named Milly bowed elegantly. “Captain Hiro, I’m guessing?”

“The man himself. Go on.”

“If I may be so direct, this will be a sales pitch for one of our products. Milly here happens to have good ears, so she overheard your conversation. Unintentionally, of course.”

“Well, I don’t mind if you eavesdropped. We’re out here talking in the open, after all,” I shrugged. Although Autumn claimed to have overheard us accidentally, I doubted it. That high-spec android with powerful hearing sensors was probably with him as an information-gathering tool, not a companion. “So? What does the famous Ideal Starways want from a simple merc like me?”

Ideal Starways was a major shipwright, half-owned by the Empire, that provided ships to the Imperial Fleet. Their ships were known for sophisticated design but middling performance. Their speed and plating maintained or exceeded a certain standard; they weren’t bad in terms of customizability, either. Compared to similar manufacturers’ ships, they were cheap. Basically, Ideal Starways were jacks of all trades, but also masters of none.

“Very funny, sir. Isn’t it false humility for a man honored by His Majesty with both a Gold Star *and* a platinum rank to call himself a ‘simple merc’?”

“He’s right, you know,” said Elma.

“He is.”

“Yep.”

“For sure.”

Everyone agreed with Autumn but me. Even Mei nodded wordlessly behind me. *What the hell is this? Whose side are you on?*

“Okay, okay, my bad. Can we get down to business? Come on, have a seat.”

“Thank you very much.” Autumn sat down across the table from us. Milly stood behind him.

“Based on what Milly there told you,” I said, “I assume you know what kind of ship we want?”

“Yes. I thought I should propose this model.” Autumn set his tablet terminal on the table and nudged it toward us.

Huh? This table has a holo-display. Why doesn't he show us the model on that? Seems a little odd to go to the effort of showing us his tablet screen...

“Okay. Guess I'll take a look.” I picked up the tablet and looked down.

Displayed on the screen was a sharp-looking medium ship. It had an elegant, streamlined design with a distinctive pointed nose, although the rear looked tougher and sturdier. It was on-brand for Ideal to give it a heroic design combining elegance and ruggedness.

I rotated the 3D model and saw that the ship had three large main thrusters and two smaller ones. I guessed it'd have powerful acceleration. There were also several side thrusters, suggesting it'd be surprisingly good at quick turns. I didn't know how the ship's output compared to its weight—it might be heavier than it looked—but I figured it'd be best at flying straight.

“What are these features in the center and on the sides?” There were strange disc shapes plopped onto both sides of the ship. I'd never come across optional parts like those.

Elma looked at the screen alongside me. “I haven’t seen those before, but they look like they’re for electronic warfare.” She cocked her head and put a hand on her delicate chin. The discs did look like some sort of ECM generator or amplifier.

“Those would be the highlight of this ship,” said Mr. Autumn. “One could certainly call this model a...prototype.”

“Whoa, whoa. Are you scamming me into test-driving a prototype?”

“It is true that this model isn’t on the market yet, but rest assured it’s a highly reliable piece of equipment that passed practical testing with flying colors.”

“And you’re hoping to get real combat data, huh? So what *does* that feature do?”

“Internally, we call that system the ‘gravity jammer.’ It’s essentially a small anti-FTL trap.” Autumn flashed a sinister grin.

Aha. That’s why he approached us so confidently.

Autumn watched smugly as we exchanged silent glances, then turned back to him.

“Such a convenient thing at such a convenient time.”

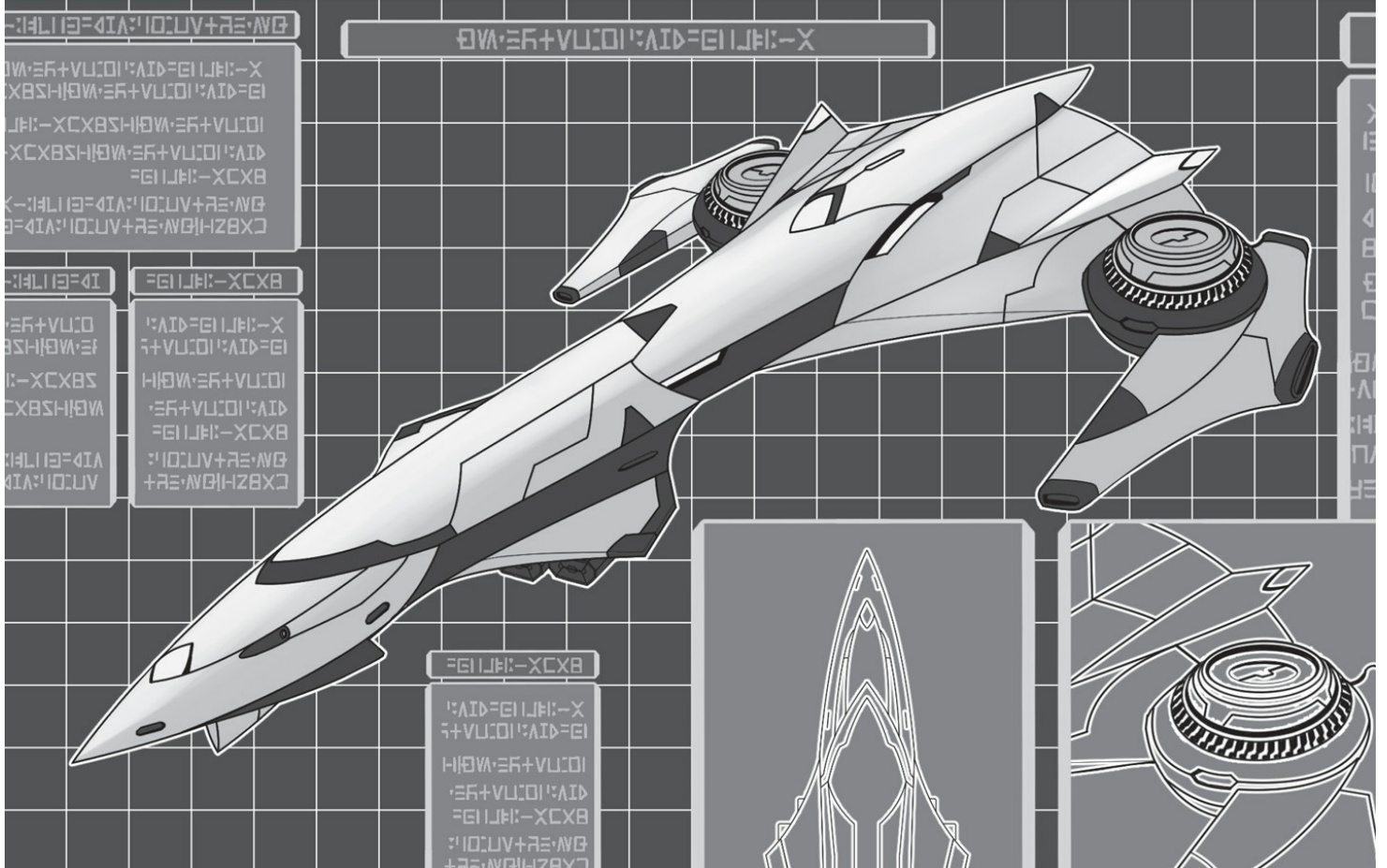
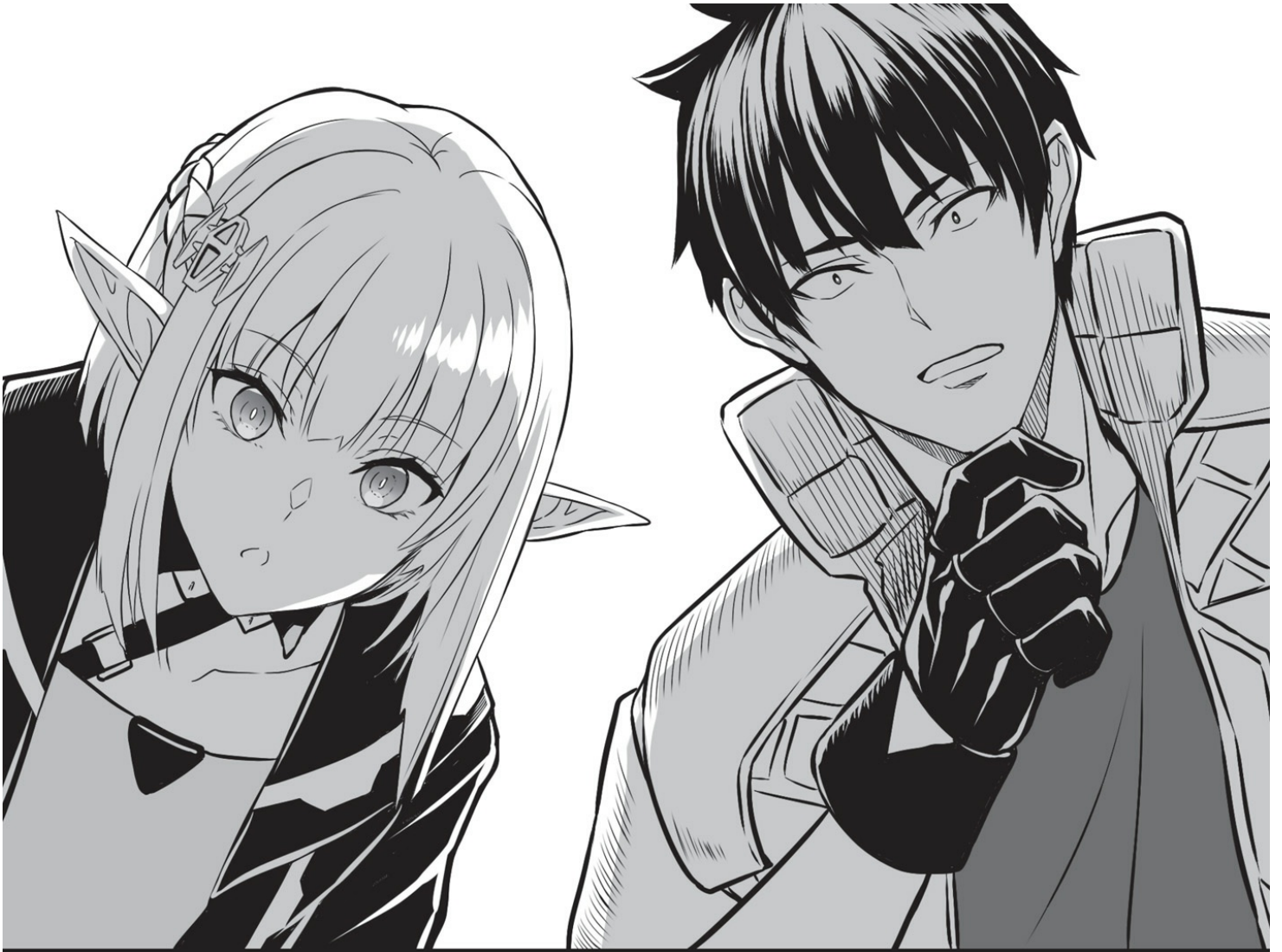
“I don’t know if I want to buy something under the table.”

“Are you going to demand something ridiculous in exchange?”

“Is it defective somehow?”

“Will it explode, or...?”

Subjected to our doubts, Autumn waved his hands frantically, denying our accusations. “No, no, it’s nothing like that. I really am part of Ideal Starways’ sales department, and I’m not trying to scam you. I’m simply proposing a genuine, honest business transaction!”



Really, though? I expected a sales pitch from a shipwright confident in their products. But offering us a secret new prototype that isn't on the market? Isn't that just too much of a coincidence?

"You gotta be suspicious of people who try to sell you the solution to your problems exactly when you need it," I explained.

"Very cautious, I see. As befits a platinum-ranker." Autumn grinned dryly.

Mei spoke up. "I have confirmed that Mr. Phillip Autumn indeed works for Ideal Starways."

"That so? Well, guess we can trust him, then."

"Anyone allowed to do business here is probably on the up and up," Mimi agreed.

Autumn grinned even more wryly at that exchange.

"Sorry. We tend to attract trouble, so..."

"Even when we're sittin' still, it comes to us. We gotta be real cautious. Sorry."

"No, no. No problem at all." Apparently, Autumn was unbothered by mere suspicion; his sour grin snapped back into a customer-service smile. *Wow. Quick transformation, huh?*

"Now, gravity jammer, was it?" said Wiska. "You say it's a small anti-FTL trap, but I'm amazed you made it so small. I've heard that anti-FTL traps use so much energy that it takes the generator of a large ship—destroyer-class, minimum—to use them properly."

Autumn confirmed that. "This small version's functions are more limited. Anti-FTL traps produce a condensed gravity wave called a 'Gravity Blast'; essentially, they use high-output gravity waves to forcibly stop an FTL drive and keep it from reactivating. They're made for battleships, and their energy demands are too great to simply condense into a smaller form."

“I see. What are the limitations you mentioned?”

“The gravity jammer can’t stop a ship that’s already begun faster-than-light travel. In extremely simple terms, anti-FTL traps’ powerful gravity waves interfere with the target ship’s mass and forcefully cancel FTL. The gravity jammer directly tricks the target’s sensors into thinking that there’s a large mass nearby, triggering the FTL drive’s safety function.”

“Ooh, gotcha,” said Tina. “Instead of changing the mass, it just makes the sensors think there’s a big ol’ asteroid, planet, colony, or ship nearby to stop FTL from activatin’, huh? Makes sense that it won’t use as much energy, then.”

Wiska and Tina posed more technical questions. I only understood about half of what they said, although they’d surely dumbed the questions down for me already.

“In short, the gravity jammer couldn’t stop a ship flying by in FTL, but it could stop one from activating its FTL drive mid-battle?” I asked.

“Correct. The effective radius is about fifty kilometers.”

“Fifty kilometers... Not very big,” Elma mused.

“No,” I agreed. A fifty-kilometer radius might sound large to someone on Earth, but fully powered thrusters could move a kilometer per second. Faster ships went up to five times that fast, so in outer space, fifty kilometers wasn’t a very wide range. But it wasn’t *small* either, to be fair. “Well, the area would move along with the ship, so I’m sure we could work well enough within that range.”

“Yep. The ship specs could be a problem, though.”

Elma was right; even if we could use the vessel’s gravity jammer, it’d be useless without adequate mobility, firepower, and defenses. I’d sooner put the gravity jammer on the *Black Lotus* than a crappy ship that couldn’t fight.

“We haven’t compromised on the model specs either, of course,” Autumn assured us. “It has a large, cutting-edge generator with energy capacitors

especially for the gravity jammer. That said, we had to make sacrifices in terms of livability and cargo capacity.”

From what I saw on the tablet, the ship had a cramped living space and tiny cargo hold. But the generator was large and had capacity to spare, and the sizable capacitors could offer bursts of ammo from high-output energy weapons. Of course, the energy in the capacitors was meant to be spent on the gravity jammer. Using them for firepower would probably affect the gravity jammer’s functionality.

“The large generator, capacitors, and gravity jammer are all in the rear block,” noted Elma. “Does that mean the front block is replaceable?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I see.”

Ideal’s spaceships used the Ideal Block System, which allowed owners to freely mix and match front and rear blocks. A rear block typically contained a ship’s generator, shield generator, thrusters, and cargo hold, among other essentials. Different varieties combined different generator sizes and different numbers of main-and sub-thrusters, as well as varying allotments for cargo space, living space, and storage space for other equipment. The front blocks mainly contained slots for laser cannons and other weapons, missile pods, torpedo tubes, sensors, and so on.

The main advantage of the Ideal Block System was that you could easily swap out a whole block if it was damaged. If your ship’s front block got totaled, you could choose a new one and return straight to the battle lines. That meant the ships were a little less durable, but ships were typically meant to take hits on their shields anyway. Most shipbuilders focused on shield strength over hull durability.

“The rear block is fixed,” I noted. “The current front block would have six slots for class II cannons and two slots for pod-type weapons. Eight weapons total.”

“Pretty middling firepower. Don’t you think this block would be better?” Elma

pointed out another.

“Oh, yeah. Two class III and two class II slots might be more convenient. That model has space for two seeker missile pods too.”

Weapon classes basically worked like this: class I was for small cannons, class II medium, and class III big. Small recon ships typically used class I cannons. They were enough to take down a civilian ship, but against another combat ship, they were basically useless. Pirates were often armed with those.

Class II cannons had standard power and were the most common ship weapons. As such, there was a variety of them, allowing you to customize your arsenal to suit your needs.

Finally, class III cannons were the biggest ship weapons on the market. They were strong to match their size, but they consumed proportionate energy. Still, their power meant that they could attenuate shields instantly. If you had the energy output to maintain them, they really kicked ass.

In *Stella Online*, a hot topic was whether you should stock up on class II weapons or obtain a few class III weapons, which were much more powerful. I leaned toward the latter. I happened to prefer an instant burst of strong ammo over prolonged, weaker firepower.

In space battles, you didn't know whether you'd keep hitting the enemy long enough for prolonged firepower to win out. I considered that strategy better in the face of a stationary target; with moving targets, it was more effective to throw everything you had at them as soon as you got the chance.

“If this data is correct, the model's mobility isn't bad either,” Elma said. “And it looks like there's room to fit two decent shields.”

“As for firepower, well, it's on par with other medium ships,” I added. “Combine the mobility and the gravity jammer, and I'd say its overall performance is great. In other words...”

“Exactly what you'd expect from Ideal,” Elma and I said in unison. Gravity

jammer aside, the model's specs were solid. Nothing stood out, but the ship was well-balanced, and had the perks of the Ideal Block System.

"The rest depends on the price." Would it fit our budget? That was the question.

Ideal quoted us 12,000,000 Ener. That was reasonable for a medium ship. Hell, it was on the cheaper side.

"That's without any bells and whistles, right?" I asked.

"Yes. That price is for what you mercenaries call the 'plain' or 'vanilla state.'"

The "vanilla state" was the basic version offered by a manufacturer. Customizing a ship cost even more money. Normally, you proceeded by swapping the generator for a stronger one, changing the shields or plating, adding or replacing weapons, customizing the life support and medical pod, and so on. The generator and plating were the most expensive upgrades.

"But the generator is high-output military grade. The same goes for the capacitors and gravity jammer," Mimi noted. "So, it might still be a good deal."

"Yeah," agreed Elma. "The generator, in particular, seems a lot better than most high-output models on the market... Wait. Is it the new model they put in military corvettes?"

"Exactly correct," Autumn answered. "Furthermore, Ideal Starways has received permission to sell Captain Hiro military-grade equipment. So we're happy to offer military goods if you like."

"Received permission? Guess that makes sense." *Maybe they got it when I received the Gold Star. Or, wait—did Serena arrange it when we were buying military battle bots? Either way, I appreciate the extra options.*

Military-grade equipment typically performed better than civilian-market tech. At the very least, it was usually much more reliable. However, the military sometimes stuck to old products far too long, and they occasionally issued some real duds. You had to be careful about that. If you jumped at the first

opportunity to buy military surplus, you might end up with a model decades—or even over a century—out of date. To be fair, though, many of those old models were reliable or well-known.

“We can provide you with genuine modern Imperial Fleet equipment,” Autumn promised. “You’ll have your pick of plating and weapons.”

The twins grinned dryly at each other, apparently unsurprised.

“These guys gotta have connections, huh?”

“It *is* Ideal, after all.”

Ideal Starways was the Imperial Fleet’s foremost manufacturer, selling the Empire countless ships. Naturally, they had connections to the producers of plating, weapons, and other rigging. Those connections got them direct access to said items.

“Okay,” I said. “How about we soup it up as much as we can within our budget?”

“Sure, but we don’t know whether it’ll return your investment,” Elma warned.

“Giving it quality equipment will raise our chances of survival. That alone is a return on investment.”

“You think...? I guess so.”

If we built a strong spaceship that won battles without a scratch, it would cost a lot less over time than trashing a series of crappy ships. And I wasn’t about to see Elma die because we’d cheaped out. Even if we invested in the best, I couldn’t guarantee her life, but I’d regret it forever if I didn’t do my utmost to give her a fighting chance.

“By the way, what’s this ship called?” I asked.

“Its development code is *ISCX-317 Antlion*.”

“*Antlion*... Like a doodlebug, huh? Interesting.”

Autumn looked surprised that I was familiar with the name. “Oh, are you

familiar with them?”

Yeah, everyone knows about doodlebugs! Oh...right. People born and raised in colonies wouldn't know about insects, and terraformed planets had limited biological diversity, so most people probably hadn't heard of antlions, at least. I wasn't sure how commonplace they were in this universe, but Autumn's reaction implied that people rarely recognized the name.

“Yeah, they dig pits to make traps in the ground and eat bugs that get caught in them,” I replied. “They're kind of ugly, but it's cool to watch them fly when they grow wings.” I remembered doodlebugs—antlions, that is—as bad at flying. Hopefully that wouldn't apply to this ship.

“I'm amazed by your wealth of knowledge. Are you a biologist?”

“No, just happen to know about them. So...*Antlion*, huh? I kind of like the sound of that name.”

“Same here,” Elma agreed. “The ship name can stay. For plating and thrusters, let's go for top-of-the-line military equipment. What about weapons, though?”

“What's wrong with the safest options? Two seeker missile pods, two class II laser cannons, and two class III lasers.” That combination of military-grade class II and class III lasers with seeker missiles that could multi-lock and control portions of the battlefield with instant firepower ought to be foolproof.

“Safe indeed.” Elma rolled her eyes.

“Why go out of our way to choose weird weapons? Seems silly to me.”

“Very convincing, coming from the guy with shard cannons and anti-ship reactive torpedoes,” she retorted sarcastically.

I shrugged. “Look, that's just the way it worked out when I picked the optimal gear for my ship.”

Shard cannons—flak cannons—were extremely powerful, but you needed to use them at nearly point-blank range. Anti-ship reactive torpedoes flew slowly

and were daunting to aim. Still, I'd loaded those two weapons on the *Krishna* to suit the ship itself.

I could replace the flak cannons with large-bore laser cannons, and I could swap my torpedo tubes for seeker missile pods, but it would drastically reduce the *Krishna's* ability to fight large and extra-large ships. Besides, my four heavy laser cannons handled small and medium ships just fine.

Elma backed down. "Well, I can just customize it once I'm used to fighting with the safe setup. Anyway, it's not like this craft was designed with high-speed dogfights in mind."

"It's more a support ship," I agreed. "It's not supposed to rush out in front with guns blazing, so we don't need to focus too much on offense."

"Hmm... But it does have large capacitors. I think we could shoot for something better than normal laser cannons in the class III slots. If it could finish off medium ships from afar, it'd be more effective overall, right?"

"You're not wrong there."

Elma did have a point. The only way the *Krishna* could quickly take out a medium ship was to approach and fire flak cannons or anti-ship reactive torpedoes, and the latter was pure overkill. The *Black Lotus's* firepower was enough to do the job with ease, but a medium ship getting into its range was pure luck, and the large EML on the prow of the *Black Lotus* was *beyond* overkill. In that regard, the *Antlion's* potential to finish off medium ships from a decent distance would be helpful indeed.

"I can't really defend myself from small ships with just seeker missiles and two military-grade class II lasers, so I was thinking plasma cannons. What do you think, Hiro?"

"Plasma cannons aren't bad, but can you strike something with them?"

Although plasma cannons were powerful, their beams moved so slowly that they were hard to land shots with. They might be good against large, virtually

immobile ships, but any mobile medium ship could surely dodge them. Against small ships, your only real option with a plasma cannon was to surprise your opponent from close range or in an outright brawl.

“I’ll need practice. But if I want to specialize in fighting small ships, a laser beam emitter might be the way to go.”

“Those do have good range, and they’re hard to dodge, but the energy and heat management would definitely be a pain...”

“I don’t mind. I used them on the *Swan*.”

What we commonly called “laser cannons” were technically pulse lasers. They emitted powerful light in short bursts; those beams damaged enemy ships by instantly vaporizing and blowing up when they struck a surface. (At least, that was my understanding. The twins or Mei might’ve given a different explanation.) Meanwhile, laser beam emitters fired continuous beams, exposing enemies to lower-output blasts for longer periods of time; that burned and sometimes melted targets.

In terms of raw power, normal laser cannons were way stronger. Shields couldn’t fully block laser beam emitters, though. I wasn’t sure how it worked, but in *Stella Online*, 30 percent of a beam emitter’s damage was dealt directly to your plating and hull. That was both annoying and convenient.

Beam emitters made quick work of fast ships with thin plating and fragile hulls. You often saw even the fastest ships burn and explode from afar due to an emitter attack. After all, they couldn’t dodge something that literally moved at lightspeed.

The weapons obviously obliterated pirate ships, which had weak plating and hulls to match their shoddy shields. Beam emitters were also good for taking down seeker missiles, torpedoes, and other flying objects. Yeah, okay, calling things in space “flying objects” was weird.

On the other hand, laser beam emitters were weak against ships with strong heat insulation and anti-laser defenses. Like, depressingly weak. If you tried

attacking those targets with a beam emitter, they'd laugh at your little peashooter and obliterate you. It'd be no exaggeration to say that beam emitters were wholly ineffective against the *Black Lotus*.

"We do have anti-ship reactive torpedoes and the *Black Lotus*'s EML to deal with bigger ships," I mused, "so it might just work."

"I think it'll be handy to be able to burn medium ships from long range. Emitters can take small ships out too. Pirate craft usually have weak life support and fire-extinguisher systems, so if we scorch them a little, they'll stop fighting right away."

Autumn used the opportunity to upsell us. "In that case, might I suggest the high-output laser beam emitter we use as a combat ship interceptor? It's compatible with standard hardpoints, so the *Antlion* is ready to equip it."

The emitter's specs did look good, so it might be worth a try. With that in mind, we began negotiating the prices of plating, thrusters, and other add-ons.

"Thank you very much," said Autumn. "I'll do everything in my power to deliver the *Antlion* as soon as possible."

"Thanks, but personally, I'd rather you do a good job than a fast job."

"Understood. I'll remind the team to be thorough about preventing defects."

Autumn returned to his booth, a big grin on his face. We'd spent 18,000,000 Ener total on Elma's new ship, the *Antlion*. Since it was a medium ship, it was naturally far cheaper than the *Black Lotus*. In fact, 18,000,000 Ener was a reasonable price compared to the cost of a standard medium ship; considering that the vessel would be armed to the teeth with military-grade equipment, it was a hell of a discount.

The price breakdown was something like this: 12,000,000 Ener for the main body; 4,000,000 for high-grade military plating; 500,000 for a military-grade high-output thruster upgrade; a million for a military-grade high-output laser

beam emitter and other weapons; and five hundred thousand for the life-support systems, medical pod, and furnishings.

We also decided to upgrade the *Black Lotus's* weapons and generators from commercial products to high-output military-grade versions. There was a lot of equipment to replace, and an expensive generator to purchase, so that process cost another twelve million Ener—jarringly close to the base price of Elma's new *Antlion*.

That base price included the *Antlion's* generator upgrade, gravity jammer, and high-yield capacitors, making the package surprisingly cheap. In return, we'd have to provide Ideal Starways with operational data, but that was no extra effort; Mei could handle it. *Damn, I'll have to do something to thank her for all her work.*

"It feels like we made a very quick decision. Should we have looked at the other companies' products first?" Mimi asked.

"Maybe," I shrugged. "But that's what happens when someone offers you unique equipment you've never seen or heard of."

"If worse comes to worst, we can sell it and spend the proceeds on another ship," Elma remarked.

"Hunh. *Could* we?" Mimi was taken aback. "Is that how it works with an unmarketed model?"

"Autumn openly sold us the craft out here in this showroom," I pointed out, "so other companies probably know about the tech concerned to some degree. It's not circulating among the general public, though, and given its nature, I'm not sure it ever will."

"That military equipment must be special-purpose. Maybe for guerrilla forces."

"It's definitely meant to anchor a target so you can finish them off. Hell, they might even be manufacturing it for Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit. Or maybe the

Imperial Fleet will issue it to a special department whose achievements caught their eye.”

“You think it’s for some kind of new military unit? Well, I guess that’s not impossible,” Elma said thoughtfully.

I didn’t know what the Imperial Fleet thought of the Pirate-Hunting Unit, but as far as we knew, Serena’s forces were on a hot streak of wins. Maybe the fleet would launch more units along the same lines and manage them all as one... fleet? Brigade? Either way, it was very possible that the gravity jammer was geared toward a project like that.

That would explain them granting Ideal permission to provide the equipment to mercenaries who mainly hunted pirates in return for efficiently gathered operational data. I could only guess what the Imperial Fleet’s aims were, but I thought my guesses would turn out pretty accurate.

“Either way, if other companies are aware of this tech to some extent, I think we’re fine to sell it. Hell, Ideal might even buy it back.”

“Yeah. They might prefer to reclaim it, rather than it ending up in another company’s hands. At any rate, Ideal’s equipment is useful, so I’m willing to accept the ship having some minor flaws,” Elma shrugged.

Frankly, the *Antlion* was only special for its gravity jammer and powerful capacitors; otherwise, its specs were middle-of-the-road for a medium ship. Plenty of other craft were faster, stronger, bulkier, or more flexible. But the gravity jammer was a massive, irreplaceable advantage, and the *Antlion* was adequate otherwise: reasonably strong, fast, and sturdy. Its fixed equipment lacked flexibility, but that was less a flaw and more an accepted trade-off.

“I think we made a good choice with the *Antlion*,” I said. “It honestly feels too suited to us, to the point that it’s creepy how well it matches our needs.”

“Agreed.”

“Strikes me as somethin’ only your legendary weird luck could cause, hon.”

“Do you think the trouble he attracts occasionally *leads* to these perks?”

I frowned at the twins’ spiritual remarks. “That doesn’t seem like a very fair trade to me.”

It sounded like they expected my so-called “weird luck” to reverse again. I was actually terrified of what might happen after this too-convenient turn of events. *Should I just hide and cower alone in the Krishna or Black Lotus for a while? Well, no. I can hide, but I can’t cower alone. I’ll get too horny for that.*

“Now that we’ve settled on a ship, want to look into your lightweight power armor?” Elma asked.

“That’s an idea, but we’ll need to leave the *Black Lotus* with Ideal for the modifications. Shouldn’t we make arrangements to stay here for a while?”

“Yes, I believe that would be best,” Mei agreed.

“Yay! We’re packing and staying in a hotel!” Hearing that, Mimi was excited to have work to do. “Leave booking it to me!”

“Oh—mind lookin’ for a place convenient to our office?” Tina asked her.

“You’re shameless, Sis...”

“Leave it to me!”

Mimi and Tina gleefully started choosing a hotel together. Wiska looked a little exasperated, but in the end, she started watching Mimi browse on her tablet too. Mei stood nearby as expressionless as ever, while Elma looked... unusually lost in thought.

“Something on your mind?” I asked her.

“It’s just... When I think about it, that was a really expensive purchase, huh?”

“A little.” I couldn’t refute that, so I didn’t.

Eighteen million Ener was a lot, like Elma said. To be honest, I didn’t know how long it’d take to recoup that investment. If we included running costs, it’d be a while. But fighting with three ships would be a lot safer than just using the

Krishna and *Black Lotus*, and we'd make more money. Plus, having three ships we could use simultaneously would make it easier to hunt pirates *and* make money off requests. Expensive though it was, I definitely thought it was reasonable.

"You paid for it, but it's my ship...right?" Elma added.

"Yep."

"I don't know what to say. How can I return it?"

"Return what? The ship? Why?" My head was full of question marks. *What the hell is she saying?*

"No, not the ship... The favor, I guess? I mean, you keep helping me out, and I still haven't paid you back." Elma frowned, waving her hands around as if trying to find an outlet for her emotions.

"Hmm... Well, I guess it's true that you haven't paid me back, but I don't really care about that anymore."

"You don't *care*? That's a lot of money..."

"What I care about is you being with me. You know, living the fun merc life together. That's enough for me. You returning money, or favors, or whatever just doesn't matter to me; I'm happy enough already."

We faced each other. We probably had the same look on our faces.

"What're they up to? Some kind of advanced flirting?"

"Is it advanced?"

"Just hang back and keep an eye on them..."

Okay, that's enough from the peanut gallery. And why is Mimi closing her eyes like she's trying to meditate?

I went back to reassuring Elma. "Either way, don't worry too much about it. Let's just be like we usually are."

"Like we usually are, huh?"

“Well, if you want to be nicer than usual, or spoil me a little, I won’t complain.”

“Pfft... Sure, if I’m in the mood.”

Elma smiled, leaned in, and gave me a kiss. The others were being a little annoying, but I was just happy I’d gotten my feelings across to her. All I could do now was pray that she *would* be in the mood. Elma was a little temperamental, after all.

Chapter 3:

One Fascinating Fox

AFTER WE'D ORDERED OUR SHIP, we quickly prepared to move our base of operations to a hotel. Not that it was a big deal; we'd stay at the hotel a few days, maybe a week at most, so we really just needed to pack a little luggage. We could always buy things there if we really needed to, so I figured traveling light would be just fine. All I bothered to bring were clothes and some small personal items. The girls obviously needed more than that, though.

After I finished packing, I waited in the *Black Lotus* lounge.

There, Mei muttered, "If we stay in a hotel, security will become a difficult issue."

"Maybe. But it's not like we can take laser launchers, hatchet guns, power armor, and military-grade battle bots to a hotel." I patted the seat on the couch next to me.

"Excuse me," said Mei, sitting beside me obediently. If I didn't invite her to sit, she always went on standing behind me instead.

"I ask you for so much, Mei. You help us out a lot. So, feel free to be a little selfish once in a while."

"I have already been able to voice my desires. You converted the *Black Lotus* to a weaponized ship for me, and are now even upgrading its weapons to military quality. You also procured military-grade combat robots on my behalf. And you treat me the same as you do Miss Mimi and Miss Elma. I could never ask for more."

"I guess. I'd like you to be a little more selfish and let me spoil you, though."

"You always spoil me, Master. I've felt no lack of that when we're in bed together."

“Oookay, enough talk of that. Sorry I said anything. But you can be a little selfish, okay? If that’s what I want, you’ll do it for my sake, right?”

“I will...ruminate on the matter.” That was an unusually vague, indecisive answer from Mei. Typically, she gave a clear yes or no. Maybe her own values—or rather, mechanical protocols—conflicted with my sweet talk.

While we waited, having our heart-to-heart, the other girls arrived.

“Mimi...sure brought a lot more luggage than the rest of us.”

“From my perspective, you all have too little.”

Elma, Tina, and Wiska carried modest travel bags less than half the size of Mimi’s. Of course, Tina’s and Wiska’s bags looked big compared to their own frames, but Mimi had *two* such bags *and* a large suitcase.

“Miss Mimi, I would be happy to carry your luggage.”

“Thank you, Mei.” Mimi handed over her giant suitcase, and Mei lifted it with ease. No surprise there.

“Want me to carry yours too, ladies?” I offered.

“What the hell? Gross.” Elma looked disgusted.

“Hey, that’s not nice,” I protested.

“Actin’ hoity-toity ain’t your style, hon.”

“Ah ha ha...” Even Wiska wouldn’t back me up this time.

What do you mean it’s not my style? I get that it’s not habitual, but come on.

“Well, looks like we’re all ready, so let’s get going. You’ve picked out a hotel by now, right?”

“Yes! I made a reservation and everything, so all we have to do is check in!” Mimi puffed her chest out proudly, although she was still struggling with tons of luggage.

“If you want to lead the way, you’ll have an easier time without your hands full. Give me a bag.”

“I’ll take one, too.”

“Oh, um...okay. Thank you. Sorry.”

Elma and I each took a bag from Mimi, freeing up her hands. After all, as I’d said, it’d be easier for her to navigate unencumbered. It didn’t matter if Elma, Mei, and I had our hands full; we probably wouldn’t get ambushed in the city, and if things got hairy, we’d just throw the bags on the ground.

“Doors locked! Let’s go.”

Now that everyone was here with their luggage, we just had to get going. I piloted the *Krishna* out of the *Black Lotus* hangar and parked it, then went through the paperwork to have the *Black Lotus* taken in for upgrades.

“We can take the tram,” said Mimi. “Our hotel is right by the station.”

“All right. Stick together, everyone.”

“We’re not children.”

The colony’s high-speed transit system, the “tram,” had a station right next to the port district. Wyndas Tertius was the star system’s biggest trading colony, which naturally meant lots of visitors. Thus, the colony had implemented transport systems for goods and people. Calling the system for people the “high-speed transit system” all the time was tiring, so everybody just called it the “tram.”

I thought that term was English. The first time I’d heard it was in a game where the strongest engineer in the universe went around dissecting monsters, but the tram was just like any other streetcar.

Anyway, we took the tram from the port district to the commercial district. Since this was a commerce colony, the vehicle was packed as hell. I kept an eye out for pickpockets and perverts, but once they saw the swords I carried, nobody came close to us. In fact, a bit of empty space surrounded us. Nobles’ swords were indeed dauntingly powerful.

“Not that I’m a real noble,” I muttered.

“People assume that if you have a big sword on your hip, though. Besides, you *are* an honorary viscount, aren’t you?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah.”

I had Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge and Gold Star emblems on my jacket. Would the average person actually know what those were, though? Or did they avoid me entirely because of the much more obvious status symbol that was my sword? Not that I minded; avoiding trouble was never a bad thing.

After taking the tram to the station, we got off, stepping outside. As we did, the mechanic twins looked around and piped up excitedly.

“Whoa! This place is busy.”

“It’s big too! Look how high the ceilings are. That’s an extravagant use of space.”

Vlad Prime was mostly inhabited by dwarves, so its roads were narrow, and its ceilings were low. For people of normal size, it was an oppressive location.

⟨*Found you!*⟩

I gasped as I felt something even more intense than last time. *What is that? It’s not someone talking. Is it just my brain? No—it’s like emotions colliding directly with my mind. Is it some psionic ability or something?*

“Hiro? Is it happening again?”

Elma and Mimi looked worried.

“Yeah. That weird feeling. You don’t notice anything...?”

“No. Are you okay?”

I was okay, yes, but it scared me to suddenly hear a voice in my head.

“Master,” Mei called warily.

I followed her gaze and saw a conspicuous figure within the crowd. It was a

girl wearing white. Her hair was also white, maybe silver; her clothes matched. The outfit was fluttery, and had a religious air almost like a shrine maiden's robes.

The moment the girl saw us, I reeled back slightly. "Urk!" Affection crashed over me like a wave, a torrent of positivity smashing into me like someone was love-bombing me. *What the hell is this? What do I do about it?*

"Hiro?" Elma shook my shoulders worriedly, but my mind was far from her.

"Excuse me! Excuse me a second!" The girl in white approached with a big smile. On her head, animal ears stood straight up. Behind her, what looked like three fluffy tails wagged madly. The sheer love and adulation emanating from her overwhelmed me. It was dazzling, in a way. It didn't feel dangerous, but I was still overwhelmed.

"Master, your vitals are in flux," Mei warned.

"Yeah, I bet!"

What is this nostalgic, sickly-sweet heartache...? Is my heart fluttering, or...? Hold on. What am I, a junior high schooler going through puberty? Calm down. Be cool. Why are these emotions suddenly gushing out of nowhere? Something weird is obviously going on, man.

"What's that girl doing to you?" Elma murmured, just as wary as Mei. She reached for the gun at her hip.

I grabbed her wrist. "Wait, it's okay. She doesn't mean any harm."

"Then what's—"

"Calm down a sec. I'm 90 percent sure there's no danger here."

The girl in white was fewer than ten steps away. She'd be here in seconds. In a cooler state of mind, I'd probably have wondered whether I should run for it, or complained about her being aggravating, but I didn't have the wherewithal now. The cacophony in my heart was just too loud.

An arm's length away from me, the girl in white stopped short. "We finally

meet, my lord!”

“My...lord?” I struggled to respond.

Up close, I could tell she was young. To me, she looked about Mimi’s age. Her eyes were bright yellow, even golden. She was pretty, too. What stood out most were the fluffy, pointed ears atop her head. They looked more like a dog’s or wolf’s ears than a cat’s, and her tails looked like a fox’s. *A shrine maiden with silver hair, ears, and three tails... That’s a little overdesigned, don’t you think?*

“First of all, calm down a little,” I pleaded. “I feel like the emotions rushing out of you are going to crush me.”

“Out of *me*? I am very sorry. My lord, let me take your hand for a moment.”

Seeing the girl clasp my right hand in both of hers, Mimi gasped. I didn’t have it in me to reassure her; it took all my concentration to stop the deluge of emotions from washing me away.

“Oh...is your eye open?” the girl asked. “That won’t do. It’s careless, leaving it that way. Excuse me a moment, my lord.”

“Hey!” Elma exclaimed.

While she panicked, the girl took my head in her hands and rose to her tiptoes. Finally, her forehead touched mine.

When I came to, I was standing in an unfamiliar building. I’d never seen it before, but its style was vaguely Japanese. I was on the dirt floor at the entrance, facing a raised wooden floor. Beyond that, I saw what looked like tatami mats.

“A temple? No... A shrine?”

The furnishings and interior design definitely suggested some religious location. But why was I here? What the hell was going on?

While I looked around in confusion, a light flashed above the tatami mats in

the back. When I squinted at its brightness, it condensed and took a humanoid form.

When the light subsided, the girl in white stood before me. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting, my lord.”

Mysterious. Does she have a personal warp drive or something?

“No, my lord.” She smiled. “This is a sort of corridor that connects our minds... A mental space, you might say. If you learn the principles here, and put in the practice, disappearing and changing form are simple.”

Okay... But are you straight-up reading my mind or what?

“Yes, my lord. You are in a spiritually defenseless position at this time. You are essentially an unclothed newborn.”

I looked down at myself and saw clothes. Heck, I even had my laser gun and sword on me. “I’m not naked.”

“That only appears to be the case from your perspective. This way, please.” The girl beckoned me onto the mats. She didn’t seem malicious, so I obeyed, taking off my shoes and sitting cross-legged in front of her while she sat seiza-style. “My lord, my name is Seijou Kugi. Oh—I believe the Grakkan Empire puts given names first? Then I ought to call myself Kugi Seijou.”



Despite sensing that her name was extremely off, I introduced myself as well. “Okay, Kugi. My name’s Hiro.” My discomfort was vague, but something just seemed weird about her name. About its meaning.

“Yes, my lord. May we get along eternally,” Kugi replied with a carefree smile, heedless of my doubts. Based on our conversation so far, she must’ve fully understood those doubts and my state of mind. Yet she didn’t mention them, perhaps because she couldn’t explain this either.

“Anyway,” I said, “can you tell me what the hell’s going on?”

“Of course, my lord. First, allow me to explain why I summoned you to this place.”

“Go for it.” I was still sitting cross-legged, but I straightened and looked Kugi directly in the eye. Her fox ears suddenly drooped as if she was troubled. *Hey, don’t deflate all of a sudden. You’re worrying me.*

“I struggle to decide where to begin,” she said. “To phrase it in extremely simple terms, you are defenseless, my lord. Given your potential, you are unlikely to come to harm, but if you fell into the hands of someone with knowledge of magic like mine...”

“I could fall into someone’s hands?” Several of the terms she used—like “potential” and “magic”—stuck out to me, but I asked about the core of the problem first.

“Yes. This all stems from the frankly sloppy act of opening your eye, then neglecting it.”

I’d gotten the elves to help me awaken to my power, but it seemed their process was “sloppy” to Kugi. Her words hinted at a deep understanding of psionic abilities. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought her knowledge might even surpass the elves’.

“Sloppy, huh...? Well, leaving aside the question of *how*, is there a way to fix that? You brought me here to do that, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct. I have connected our spirits and created a shell, though that is only a temporary measure. Having performed first aid, all I now need to do is return you.”

She works fast. Actually, how does time flow here? And what’s going on with my real body? Did I faint? I guess that’s not important right now. I’m just curious. “Well, thank you...I think. You went to a lot of effort just for me, right?”

“Yes, that is true, but... Do you not distrust me at all?”

“I probably would in most cases, but you just barraged me with a whole lot of genuine affection. Hard to doubt you after that.” I couldn’t bear to look at her, so I averted my eyes. Just remembering her adoration made my face burn. The nervous excitement had reminded me of being a teenager in love for the first time, and boy, was it embarrassing.

“M-my deepest apologies for that. Um...that level of telepathy normally wouldn’t affect someone so strongly. I don’t know why, but you seem quite sensitive to receiving mind waves.”

“You’re saying my sensitivity to telepathy is boosted like three thousand times?”

“Surely not three thousand. I’d say you are a hundred times more sensitive than most to malice and killing intent, and as a side effect, fifty times more sensitive to other emotions. Given your sensitivity, I have to wonder whether you have been unusually aware of others’ hostility and malice, especially those who don’t wield telepathy magic.”

“Okay. I think I know what caused that.” Mary, in all likelihood. I must’ve unconsciously increased my sensitivity to hostility through constantly dodging her potentially fatal shots while I fought in the middle of that horde of crystals. Afterward, I’d made it to this point without so much as realizing how much my sensitivity had increased. “That bitch cursed me. Next time I see her, I’ll make her pay.”

“Some people can be so cruel.” Kugi was pissed off on my behalf, having

evidently seen Mary through my mind's eye. *Aw, cute.*

"You said you treated me, right? Can we go back to where we were before? I'm a little worried about what's going on over there."

"I am happy to, if that is what you want, but discussing things here would be more convenient. Time essentially doesn't pass here."

Oh? So although it feels like this conversation's taking a long time, it's actually happening instantaneously while we stand face to face? In that case, this could be an incredibly efficient means of communication.

"With a little training, you will be able to read what others wish to convey through not just their words, but their minds," Kugi continued.

"That'd be convenient," I acknowledged. "But if I stay here, and only learn to read *your* mind, it won't help much, right? Besides, Mimi, Elma, Mei, Tina, and Wiska—my friends in my crew—don't know you."

"That is a good point, my lord."

"Also, the whole 'my lord' thing... I'm gonna need to know why you call me that."

"Yes, I will gladly explain it," Kugi replied. "However, when we return, please remember you will need to control yourself through your own strength. My treatment is only *temporary*."

"Got it. Do I need training or something?"

"Correct. We can discuss things further there." Light enveloped Kugi, and she disappeared. At the same time, my consciousness melted into the light as well.

When I came to, I saw the back of Mei's head. She stood in front of me to shield me from Kugi.

"Please leave," she ordered.

I recalled that Mei had been behind me before my consciousness moved to

that weird mind space. She must've jumped in *fast*.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Mei."

Mei whipped around, gazed at me for a moment, then backed down. "I see I overstepped."

"No. I think your actions were reasonable. I should thank you."

It made sense that she was leery of a random person who showed up out of nowhere and suddenly grabbed me. Although Kugi's actions had apparently been an emergency maneuver, and well-intentioned, her behavior must've seemed bizarre at best to someone not in the know.

"Are you okay?" Elma demanded. "She didn't do anything weird to you?"

"All we did was press foreheads."

"Is that really all?"

"Not exactly, but really, she helped me out." I looked at the girl in white.

"Could you introduce yourself again? Kugi, right?"

She smiled and bowed politely. "Yes, my lord. It is a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Kugi Seijou."

I looked around for a moment. "At any rate...we'll raise eyebrows if we talk here. How about we head to our destination?"

Excluding me, our whole group—which also included Mimi—consisted of pretty girls. I already heard people around us speculating that this was a lover's quarrel, talking about the girls fighting over the "evil-looking guy," saying they had bad taste... *Hey, would you cut it out? I'll fight you all, I swear!*

"Okay," said Elma. "You're going to explain this, right?"

"That's the plan. You'll help, right, Kugi?"

"Yes, my lord. I will do my best to explain things."

"Okay..."

After that exchange, we walked for a few minutes in silence. Then Tina started to bombard Kugi with questions.

“Your name’s Kugi, right? You’re cute. Oh! Are those tails? Mind if I touch ‘em?”

“You may, so long as you aren’t forceful.”

Wiska joined in. “M-may I, too?”

“Certainly.”

Behind me, Kugi and the mechanics chatted like friends. As for me, Mimi, Elma, and Mei stood at my left, right, and back respectively. I was under strict watch, and the jealous gazes of the single men we passed scorched me.

“Tch...!”

“Pfft!”

Hey, I hear you guys clicking your tongues and spitting in my direction. I’d do the same if I were you and saw two girls clinging to me. Mei couldn’t cling to me, since I was in front of her. She was carrying Mimi and Elma’s luggage on her own, practically crushed by bags.

“Hey, Kugi, where’re ya from? I’ve never seen clothes like those before.”

“The Holy Verthalz Empire. I arrived at this colony just the other day.”

“Whoa! That’s real far. Did ya get to the Grakkan Empire through a gateway?”

“I am not sure. I traveled on a ship with my countrymen, so it was hard to tell. The people from the Divine Ministry who sent us here didn’t tell us much.”

“Huh? You were sent here with no idea where you were going?”

“Indeed. However, although I wasn’t sure where I was heading, I did know what I needed to do there. I didn’t pay the destination itself much mind.”

The conversation behind me started to give me a headache. There were a lot of things I wanted to comment on. Now wasn’t the time for that, though; I could practically feel the eyes to my left and right boring into me. *No need to be*

that *wary, girls*.

“Are you sure she didn’t do anything to you?” Elma pressed me. “Aren’t you normally more guarded?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Mimi agreed.

“Yeah, but... It’s hard to explain.”

They were right that, normally, I’d have been extremely cautious around Kugi. The sudden appearance of a beautiful visitor from Verthalz, a place known for its psionic technology, looked suspicious. It was maybe even fishier that she seemed to fawn excessively over me, even calling me “my lord” for no apparent reason.

From Mimi and Elma’s perspective, it was even worse that I was weirdly welcoming toward Kugi, although I should’ve been the leeriest of all. In fact, I showed no skepticism whatsoever. That was suspicious, so of course my crewmates thought Kugi had done something to me when we touched foreheads. Or maybe they just thought I’d fallen for her charms.

To be honest, Kugi *was* adorable. She had a pretty face, her foxlike ears bobbed sweetly, and cutest of all was the way her tails kept wagging around. Her personality and even demeanor were attractive too. She had a sort of elegance different from Elma’s or Serena’s. Perhaps even more importantly, her boobs were mid-sized or maybe bigger. They were bigger than Elma’s, for sure.

“You’re thinking rude thoughts right now, aren’t you?” Elma pinched my arm.

“Hey. That really hurts.” *How does she know what I’m thinking? It defies belief. Am I leering so much that it’s easy to tell?* “In all seriousness, it’d be a lie to say she did *nothing* for me, but I at least don’t think she has any ill will.”

“That’s too vague,” Elma objected.

“Look, even I don’t fully understand this situation. I may have learned Kugi’s name, but I didn’t know she was from Verthalz.”

“That’s just it, Master Hiro. How’d you find out her name?” Mimi asked.

“We can discuss this at the hotel, but basically, she formed a psionic connection with me when our heads touched.”

“Is that...safe?”

“Can’t answer that one. This is unprecedented for all of us. That holy empire’s full of mysteries.”

I’d looked up the Holy Verthalz Empire on a computer before, out of curiosity. It was a galactic empire far from this one. Even by hyperlane, getting there could take half a year—literally a hundred and eighty days or more.

Verthalz’s relationship with the Grakkan Empire, where we worked, was more or less neutral. The two empires did have *some* diplomatic ties. Verthalz was at least much closer to the Grakkan Empire diplomatically than the latter’s enemies, such as the Belbellum Federation or Birginia Alliance. It was theoretically possible to travel to Verthalz via gateway network if your application went through.

Kugi’s homeland maintained standard diplomatic channels with other nations, and accepted diplomatic missions, but they strictly limited the movements of other nations’ fleets and civilians through their territory. They didn’t trade much either. You could say they were mostly isolationist.

Their treatment of those who entered their territory without permission was correspondingly harsh, to the point that lots of unsettling rumors went around. For instance, they’d supposedly brainwashed captives using psionic powers. I’d also heard that they cared a lot about blood purity, making them discriminatory and merciless toward foreigners.

I didn’t know if any of that was actually true, but if you took those rumors at face value, it seemed dangerous to accept psionic interference from someone from Verthalz.

“When I experienced her psionic abilities for myself, I thought they were convenient,” I added. “But scary. Even I can think of plenty of ways she could misuse them. That said, she didn’t do anything along those lines.”

Considering what Kugi had said in that mind world, it would be hard for a user of psionics to harm me with their telepathic abilities unless they were experienced on top of malicious. At least, that was what I'd gleaned. But didn't that mean Kugi could do exactly that if she wanted to?

"She apparently forced the connection because she was concerned for my safety... But in retrospect, I'm still not sure of her exact circumstances. Like, I have no idea why she calls me 'my lord' and acts so respectful."

"Really?"

"Really—I swear. You two know my background, after all." I'd popped into this universe in the Tarmein System, where I met Mimi and Elma. There was no "before" that, so there was no way I'd know Kugi.

"That's even more suspicious. How in the world did she sniff out your presence?" Elma wondered.

"I just hope she can explain everything," I sighed. "Including that."

Chapter 4:

Contact with the Holy Verthalz Empire

IN THE LOUNGE OF THE HOTEL Mimi had reserved, we sat across from Kugi. Well, I guess that's misleading. Tina and Wiska actually perched on either side of her.

"So, uh, let's introduce ourselves, I guess," I said. "Kugi, I'd appreciate if you told us everything you can about yourself."

"If that's what you wish, my lord, I would never refuse. My name is Kugi Seijou, and I am a shrine maiden for the Holy Verthalz Empire's Divine Ministry." She sat with perfect posture and spoke clearly. It seemed she wasn't about to hide who she was.

"Okay. Can you tell us what role the Divine Ministry and shrine maidens play in Verthalz?"

"Of course. The Divine Ministry governs rituals and the like within the Empire's territory. As you know, my homeland places great importance on magic—what you call psionic technology—so the Divine Ministry wields great political power. I work for said ministry."

"Go on."

"Yes, my lord. I've heard that people from other places understand most easily when we describe shrine maidens as agents of the Divine Ministry. It is shrine maidens' duty to dedicate our lives to serving those who visit from greater worlds—people such as yourself, my lord."

"Oookay, things are going off the rails real fast."

Jeez... Is my luck balancing out after I got the Antlion so easily? I glanced to either side. Mimi and Elma were both befuddled. I understood how they felt; the stuff about it being Kugi's duty to serve me for life weirded me out too. You can't just spring that on a guy.

“U-um, did I say something out of line...?” Kugi stammered.

“No, don’t worry about it. Can we ask you a few questions?”

“Yes, my lord. Please ask me anything.”

“Okay, thanks. First, what do you mean by ‘visit from greater worlds’?”

“Exactly what I said. You know your own origins better than anyone, don’t you, my lord?” Kugi cocked her head.

Wow. Okay, guess I can’t play dumb forever. She means Earth—or the dimension where it exists. Or the universe it exists in, maybe.

“Yeah, you’re right about that. But I don’t see the connection to a shrine maiden serving me for life and all. Why is that your role? Does your country have a policy to protect people like me?” And what the hell did Verthalz stand to gain from this? So far, it didn’t make sense.

“To explain the circumstances, I will have to tell you about our duties, and about my homeland... Its origin, specifically. It has a history stretching back ages.”

“Give it to me in three sentences.”

“Th-three? Er...” Kugi groaned to herself for a moment. Then, determination on her face, she gazed into my eyes. “Long ago, the universe became unstable due to our actions. Greater beings interfered to help us avert destruction, but as punishment, we must work to maintain this universe’s stability. Your arrival resulted from an instability, so it’s my duty to care for you.”

“Mei?”

“Yes, Master. That was exactly three sentences,” Mei said stoically, her face totally expressionless.

Not bad, Kugi.

“Ugh, quit fooling around,” Elma groaned. “And stop pulling Mei into your foolishness. It’s your duty to care for him because he comes from elsewhere,

huh? That still doesn't really connect the dots for me."

"Our actions left this universe riddled with holes and cracks. On rare occasions, beings from a greater world fall into this universe. My lord is one example."

"Okay..."

"A shockin' truth's been unveiled, hon!" Tina said, although she looked unbothered.

"Is it true, though...?" Wiska seemed skeptical. Personally, I didn't necessarily *doubt* Kugi's claim, but it wasn't revelatory. It was just too grand to comprehend.

"Arriving here means that you lost all connections, my lord. Your forebearers, blood relations, friendships, status, home, and assets are gone. Is it so strange for us to atone for the actions that led to you losing such precious things?" Kugi gazed toward us with pure, unclouded eyes.

Hmm. Well, she's not wrong, for the most part. Everything she listed, I lost. But frankly, it still didn't make sense that my arrival in this universe was that distant empire's fault.

"I understand your explanation," said Mimi. "But if Master Hiro says he doesn't want your help, you'll have to accept that, won't you?"

Kugi slumped sadly. "W-well... Yes, that is true."

Although she was the one offering to serve me, *accepting* indeed fell to me. If I said I didn't want her, then she couldn't force me to take her. Or maybe there was more to her country's policy? "Wait. If I refused your help, what would happen to you, Kugi?"

"Um...I would have to return to my homeland."

"Don't try to cover up the truth," I pried, eyes narrowed.

"I would...be disposed of." Her fox ears drooped sadly.

“Disposed of?”

“Such is the punishment for failing to fulfill my shrine maiden duties. Even I don’t know how I would be treated under those circumstances.”

“Oh, no...” Mimi was lost for words.

Elma leaned back in her chair and sighed. Tina looked at me questioningly, as if asking what I was going to do, while Wiska patted the despondent Kugi’s back.

“I had a feeling,” I said. “Mimi, add her to our reservation.”

I can’t. I can’t just abandon her. Part of me feels like I’m being taken advantage of, but I couldn’t sleep at night if I left someone with so much genuine goodwill to die. I can’t save everyone, and I’m not about to try. But it’s a different story when the person’s already sitting right in front of me.

“Got it!” Mimi jumped up and ran off toward the lobby.

“Here he goes again,” Elma sighed.

“I’m leaving my final decision aside for the time being,” I said. “I can’t give you an answer right now, Kugi. But if you intend to take care of me, that means you plan to join us, right?”

Kugi’s ears perked up, and her tails wagged. “Y-yes! If you’ll permit it, I will accompany you to the ends of the universe.” She looked genuinely delighted.

To me, though, this was a migraine in the making. “Joining me would mean spending time with everyone at this table. How well it would turn out is a question of compatibility. More importantly, everyone...uh...”

How do I put this? Do I just say I’m hooking up with all of them? Wouldn’t that imply that she should expect the same? That doesn’t seem right...even if it’s literally correct.

“My lord.”

“Yeah?”

“My duty is to give you my body and soul, serve you, and support you.”

“I don’t want you to think you have to do that because of your duty, or mission, or whatever... But, well, I guess I’m out of line saying that.” My being with Mei proved me a hypocrite in that regard. To be fair, though, Mei was the one who’d seduced me. She’d kind of come to me with that in mind to begin with. Maidroids and other machine intelligences seemed to have a pretty romantic idea of love.

“The point is, we’d all have to be compatible. So consider this a trial period. Also, joining me would mean living the life of a mercenary, so your life would be in danger. You’d better be ready—”

“No matter the danger, I want to be by your side, my lord.” Kugi gazed intently into my eyes, looking determined.

What in the world had the Holy Verthalz Empire driven into this girl? What kind of education did it take to make someone devote their life to a stranger and call them “my lord”? I figured Kugi was about Mimi’s age. It just wasn’t right.

“Okay. Then the rest depends on whether you get along with everyone.”

“Yes, my lord. I’m sure I will pass this trial.” Kugi smiled sweetly.

Yeah. I bet you’ll be just fine.

Elma looked happily around the room. “Wow. Very pretty. And spacious.”

It’s spacious, all right. And the furniture’s classy and comfortable-looking. This is better than a suite... I guess it’s one of the penthouses.

“Staying someplace like this still feels wrong,” murmured Mimi.

“Yeah, I really get ya there,” agreed Tina. “It’s all, what’s the word... highfalutin’.”

“Highfa...? Well, I know what you mean.”

The room's size and luxury seemed to overwhelm Mimi, Tina, and Wiska. Personally, I was right there with them.

Incidentally, all this room's luxury was costing us about 5,000 Ener each. Including Kugi, there were seven of us, which came to 35,000 Ener for a week's stay.

When four of us had stayed on the resort planet Sierra III, we'd paid 560,000 Ener for two weeks, which broke down to 70,000 per week per person. Why was this such a bargain in comparison?

"Ex-excuse me... You could put me in a more normal room," Kugi said, trembling like a puppy as her three tails bristled. She was likewise overwhelmed by the sudden luxuriousness. She'd mentioned that she'd been spending her time mostly at a Verthalz outpost here in the Grakkan Empire—a temple, basically.

"Enough of that. This is normal for us. Heck, it's a lot cheaper than that resort system."

"I... That's true." Mimi, who'd chosen our plan when we stayed at the resort, had a distant look in her eyes. We'd spent extravagantly back then due to our circumstances.

"He's braggin' about resort systems now, Wis! *That's* highfalutin'!"

"W-well, he does make a lot of money as a mercenary. I suppose he's well off."

"Aren't you two pretty rich now yourselves?" I rebutted.

"Oh yeah..."

"I forgot..."

The twins had made a combined 3,600,000 Ener—their 30 percent cut—when we sold the ship we'd captured, which came out to 1,800,000 each. They could spend extravagantly and have money to spare, though it'd be gone in an instant if they, say, bought a ship of their own and upgraded it a bit.

“How do we pay taxes on this stuff? Does it count as contractor work? We’re here on company orders, so is it compensation for employed work, or what?”

“Maybe we should discuss that with the company...or a tax bureau.”

The twins launched into a headache-inducing conversation. In my case, I was a merc first and foremost, although I had upper-class Grakkan citizen rights. *Wait. If I’m a citizen now, doesn’t that mean I need to pay taxes? I’d better ask Mei later.*

“Mercenary” was kind of a special occupation, and even I didn’t grasp how taxes worked in the Grakkan Empire. I knew some were taken out of my government rewards, and I didn’t think bounties on pirates were taxed, but I had no idea how that meshed with citizenship.

Tax bureaus were scary. You had to watch yourself around those. Hide your income like an idiot, and you might get nunchaku-ed to death. Fortunately, Mei could probably take care of the accounting for us.

“C’mon,” Elma demanded. “Quit standing around and help us unpack.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I replied. “It’s not like I have much luggage.”

I’d only brought one bag, after all. I wasn’t sure “unpacking” was even necessary for me. Mimi would struggle more with all of her luggage, but she wouldn’t want my help. Supposedly women had things they didn’t want men to see, even if they were close. I’d just give her space unless she asked for help.

“Oh, yeah. Mei, come over here for a sec.”

“Yes, Master?”

I took Mei into the master bedroom. *Hmm. That’s a huge bed. King-size, for sure. Three people could sleep on that easily.* I threw my bag on the couch and turned to Mei.

She was on her knees in front of the bed. Not *in* the bed, on the floor. “What are you doing?” *That might’ve come out a little harsh.*

“You invited me to the bedroom, so I thought you might want this.”

“No... Kugi may need to get her things from the temple, so I’d like you and Elma to go with her and see what you can sniff out. We’re just in here so I can tell you in advance.”

“That is a shame. As for your orders, understood. Please leave it to me,” Mei stood and nodded, as expressionless as ever, but still clearly disappointed.

With her and Elma on the job, I could rest easy. Normally, I’d have gone with them, but I wanted to keep Verthalz at arm’s length until the situation was clearer.

Half an hour after I agreed to let Kugi join our crew as a trial member, we’d finished bringing our luggage into the room and unpacked a little. We were taking a break on the comfortable couches in our lavish penthouse.

Wiska sat next to me. She looked up and asked seriously, “So, she’s offering you her body *and* soul?”

That’s a fastball there. A blazing straight.

Kugi—the one who’d made that declaration—had gone with Elma and Mei to retrieve her things from the temple. I’d asked Elma the same thing I’d asked Mei, so now I was waiting for the results of their investigation.

“Pretty much.” I looked away from Wiska, up to the ceiling. “I believe in appreciating generosity, but I won’t be rushing things.”

Kugi’s affection for me seemed genuine, but I was just too cautious to do anything with her when I didn’t know the true intentions of the Holy Empire that had sent her.

Besides, her feelings were a little *too* heavy. Even I had to cringe back a bit from such an outpouring of emotion. I mean, if you think I was being picky when such a cute girl had a crush on me, you’re not wrong. Still, the whole thing was too sudden. Even I needed time to process someone’s feelings.

“Appreciatin’ generosity? No way ya believe in that.” Tina glared at me.

I gracefully ignored her. *Look, I just hesitated with you two because of your size. If you looked at least as mature as Mimi, I wouldn't have taken as long.*

What's that? Why hadn't I gone after Serena or Chris? Sleeping with either of them would've been an elaborate means of suicide. I did believe in appreciating generosity, but there were limits.

If I hooked up with Serena, there was no telling what the Holzes might do to me. The best outcome would be a forced marriage into the family. In the worst case, well, I'd be more than six feet under.



As for Chris, I was acquainted with her grandfather-slash-legal guardian. Her age was an issue, too. Count Dalenwald would no doubt be pissed at me for corrupting his adorable granddaughter. It wasn't hard to imagine being forced to take responsibility in more ways than one.

Mimi stared up from her tablet terminal. "How much do you honestly believe what she's saying?"

"I don't think she's lying, frankly. Her psionic abilities are the real deal."

"That so?" Tina raised an eyebrow.

"No doubt. She knows and handles psionics at a higher level than elves, so I don't think there's any room to question whether she's from Verthalz."

Kugi's understanding of psionics had seemingly been at a totally different stage, one that was three or four times as technologically advanced. If you compared a civilization that'd just developed steam engines to one with interstellar travel, you'd get a sense of it.

"And you believe, if *that's* true, her other claims will hold water too?"

"I guess so. Also, I already know she has no ill intent. That's hard to convey, since I learned it from Kugi's psionic link with me. But the bottom line is there's basically no reason to doubt her."

"Um, Master Hiro...could her psionics have brainwashed you?"

"Same thing I was thinkin'," Tina agreed.

"You'd think so. I get that, I do. But Kugi could brainwash me way more completely if she really wanted to." Okay, I was reading between the lines. Still, I felt almost certain that—although Kugi probably didn't approve of using psionics for such things—she could've brainwashed the whole crew with the exception of Mei. And Mei would only be immune because she was mechanical.

"Is it safe to bring someone with powers like that aboard?"

"I think that depends on how much we can learn to trust each other," I

replied. At a certain point, I might as well worry that Mimi would poison me, Elma would slit my throat, Mei would snap my neck, or Tina and Wiska would blow up the *Krishna*. “It’ll be hard to hear this from me, but try not to be too prejudiced against Kugi. I think she’s a good person at heart, even if she’s kind of sheltered and strange.”

“From our perspective,” said Wiska, “it’s troubling that you’re so supportive of her, even though you haven’t known her longer than we have.”

“Point taken. You couldn’t really get why unless you experienced that telepathy stuff. At any rate, we need to take it easy for a while, and I think spending quality time together will help us all understand each other. If we just don’t mesh well, I won’t let her stay on board.”

If the addition of Kugi upset the fragile balance of our personal relationships, then she obviously couldn’t join the crew. My five girls versus one shrine maiden—you could guess which was more important to me.

“So you ain’t set on bringin’ her aboard?”

“Of course not. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Hunh... All right, if that’s your thinkin’, I’ll be optimistic about this too.”

“I don’t follow your logic,” Wiska told Tina skeptically.

I’m also curious about why that convinced her.

“If that Kugi gal has mind-control powers and could brainwash ya all she wants, she mighta scrambled your brain like ya said, right? Doesn’t seem like she did, though. In other words, she avoided brainwashin’ ya, right?”

“I...guess so.”

“That means she’s got the sense not to abuse her powers willy-nilly, yeah? So we’ll be fine. That’s my take, anyhow.”

“Hmm...don’t you think you’re trusting her too easily?” Mimi was also dubious of Tina’s optimism.

The dwarf just shrugged. “Maybe. But ain’t it easier than bein’ suspicious? Besides, I’m sorry to saddle Mei with the worryin’, but we can leave figurin’ it out to her, can’t we?”

“You might be right. Psionic powers couldn’t brainwash Mei, at least.”

“True...”

Since Mei was mechanical, it was hard to imagine her brain being tampered with via psionics. Even if Kugi brainwashed the rest of us, Mei could deal with her.

“Is leaving everything to Mei okay...?”

“I think so,” I declared. “If it isn’t, she’ll let us know.”

If that was the case, we could figure it out when the time came.

When Mei returned, we told her what we’d discussed in her absence. “Yes, of course,” she agreed enthusiastically. “Please leave it all to me.” Though her face was as expressionless as ever, her enthusiasm was palpable. If she had tails like Kugi’s, they’d probably have been wagging like hell.

“You really are suspicious of me.” Kugi slumped sadly.

“What do you expect?” Elma grinned acerbically.

The exchange with Mei had taken place right in front of Kugi. I wouldn’t normally say stuff like that in front of the person in question, but I’d done so now on purpose. “Expect your every move to be monitored, Kugi,” I told her firmly.

“Yes, my lord. I will work my very hardest to earn everyone’s trust.”

“Cool. But don’t get too nervous about it. A tense thread is more likely to snap; if you’re tense all the time, you’ll go around the bend. Better to let us see you as you are, especially if you have a clean conscience.”

“Are you certain, my lord?” Kugi cocked her head.

“Sure am,” I said confidently. To convince people at times like this, you really needed to nudge them, even if some might view that as bulldozing over concerns. “As long as we’re airing doubts...Mei, can you report on Kugi’s background check?”

“Yes, I am ready. To lead with the bottom line, I believe there is a nearly 100 percent chance that Kugi is indeed a ‘shrine maiden’ from the Holy Verthalz Empire.”

“What’s got you so convinced?” I asked. If Mei was willing to go that far, then she had to have proof.

“The facility to which Kugi took us was, as she claimed, an outpost known as a ‘temple.’ I inquired about the building’s construction records, and the official owner is a Verthalz government agency. At least, the Grakkan Empire recognizes it as such.”

“Then the temple probably isn’t some kind of hideout for sleazy scam artists or outlaws,” Elma noted.

“I believe you are correct.”

Their remarks left Kugi stunned and wide-eyed. “Sl-sleazy scam artists...” The sheer amount of suspicion on her head seemed to come as a shock to her.

“Well, I’m not all that surprised,” I told Mei. “I just had you check in case.” But to what extent was Kugi supposed to look after me, and for how long? Was her so-called “mission” genuinely for life? “How’d the people concerned react?”

“They asked me to invite you to their temple.”

“Yeah, figures.”

Accepting Kugi would put a certain burden on me, too—not mentally, but in a more boring financial sense. If Verthalz had a national policy of sending shrine maidens to serve people like me, I’d probably have to discuss expenses with them sooner or later.

More importantly, I was a mercenary working in the Grakkan Empire. How

would they feel about an agent of a rival empire's religious institution traveling freely with me? At some point, Kugi could be exposed to the Imperial Fleet's military secrets, so we'd need to clear her with the Imperial government.

"We've got time, so let's head to the temple soon," I said. "Nothing needs our attention ASAP; schedule the visit sometime tomorrow or after."

"Understood, Master."

"I think that does it for now. Man, I'm beat from all this commotion."

"Agreed. I'm exhausted," Elma said. Her long, pointed ears drooped slightly as she spoke.

Wow. That's how you know she's really tired.

"Don't just stand around, Kugi," called Tina. "Put your stuff down. C'mon, get over here!"

"Th-thank you." Kugi's brain seemed to finally restart after the preceding shock. She followed Tina into a room in the back. Kugi's only luggage was tied inside what looked like a furoshiki. She must've traveled light thus far.

"All right. Once Tina and Kugi are done, let's go get some food. It's about dinnertime, yeah?"

There was no morning, day, or night in a colony, but a fair bit of time had passed since we'd arrived at Wyndas Tertius and eaten. Everyone was hungry. Besides, even if we didn't literally eat from the same pot, breaking bread together would be a great way to establish camaraderie.

Leaving the hotel seemed like a pain, and we planned to stay for a week, so we decided to try the hotel cafeteria—or restaurant, rather.

"Whoa. This restaurant has chefs?!"

"Look, a dwarf."

The kitchen at the back of the restaurant was visible to guests. In it, we saw a

male dwarf and what looked like humans cooking together.

“Chefs in the Empire tend to be dwarves, right?”

“In space, yes. People who have inhabited planets since olden days tend to have relatively intact cooking traditions, but most Imperial citizens leave meals to automatic cookers. What’s the cooking situation like back in Verthalz?”

“I was raised in a facility under the Divine Ministry’s jurisdiction, so I’m afraid I don’t know much about common folk,” Kugi replied. “However, I think many are capable of simple cooking. I have some meager skills myself.” Her ears perked up, and she proudly puffed out her chest. It wasn’t clear just how much she could cook, but despite calling her skills “meager,” she looked pretty confident.

“Wow. You could be a fourth skilled cook in our crew alongside Hiro, Mei, and Sis.”

“More than half of the seven of you can cook? That’s incredible.”

“You’re right,” replied Elma. “Apparently, only one in every few hundred or thousand people in the Empire can cook. People like me who *can’t* are actually the majority.”

She used the table’s holo-display to bring up a menu. It was chaotic, combining fancy dishes with stuff you might find at an izakaya. *Wow, weird.*

“Whoa. They’ve got Imperial *and* dwarven cuisine!”

“Oh, I get it! That’s because the chef’s a dwarf.”

Imperial cuisine reminded me of a range of Western foods. The Grakkan Empire spanned countless star systems and had a vast history, so its current overarching culinary style had obviously absorbed many cultures. To me, though, it seemed like a haphazard mishmash of French and Italian food with other stuff sprinkled in.

As for dwarven cuisine...it was mostly dishes that went well with bread and booze. There were also fancy grilled dishes, fried foods, and various spicy

flavors, sort of like Chinese fusion. Elven cuisine had Japanese aspects, but Japanese recipes didn't seem to fit into the framework of Imperial cuisine.

"What would you like, Kugi?" I asked.

"They're all dishes I've never seen before..." She looked overwhelmed.

Makes sense. Verthalz is a distant nation—a visitor from there won't recognize the foods at a restaurant that only serves Imperial and dwarven cuisine.

"Okay, then let's get a bunch of simple, unintimidating dishes for everyone to share."

"That seems a bit informal, but it's probably the best option," Elma agreed.

"I'll order some small plates!" Mimi tapped the table holo-display, picking out several dishes. I couldn't help noticing that she was ordering a *lot*, but I chose to ignore that.

"Here in the Empire, people mostly eat food made from food cartridges by automatic cookers. What do you eat in Verthalz?"

"Meals cooked from fresh ingredients, if possible. When that isn't an option, we eat preserved foods. Advances in preservation technology have made delicious food possible without preparing the dishes on your own, so fewer people cook from scratch these days. Automatic cookers and food cartridges aren't especially common, though."

"Ooh. What kinda dishes do ya eat?" Tina asked.

"Different kinds of processed legumes. Farmed chiras are a staple as well."

"Chiras?"

"Chiras are cephalopods with shells. Foreigners seem to find them unappetizing, but they're delicious and healthy. We also process a fish called chiko and a root vegetable called karo, which is easy to grow and very nutritious. The leaves can be eaten too, so there isn't any waste."

“I see.”

Cephalopods with shells, huh? Like ammonites or nautilus mollusks? And processed legumes... Well, you can make beans into basically anything. Back on Earth, soybeans are made into soy milk or tofu, and even the residue from tofu production is edible. Then you've got natto, boiled edamame, miso soup, soy sauce... People make all those from just one type of bean, so saying “beans” potentially implies a whole lot of variety. Plus, they eat fish and root veggies, huh?

“Do you not eat meat?” I asked.

“We do, but it is very expensive.”

“Things aren't much different here in that regard.”

While we talked, our food was brought to the table. The main dish was a large flatbread with various toppings, like a pizza. Other dishes resembled mashed potatoes, grilled meat, and more. Incidentally, there were no soups. Even liquid-based dishes were thick enough that they were more akin to pastes or sauces.

“Is that...meat?” Kugi's eyes sparkled as she looked at a skewer of whitish grilled meat.

“What kind is it?” I shuddered.

“Cultured,” Mimi replied with a somber look.

“Ah... Well, I guess we're used to it by now.”

“Yep.”

We'd visited a cultured meat factory one time and come out traumatized, but fortunately, we could eat it without much stress lately. However it started out, it was just meat now that it was processed. It was good when you tried it, so stressing over it didn't help you at all.

Mimi loved to bring weird foods aboard the ship and have taste-testing parties, so we were used to out-there culinary experiences. So what if the

cultured meat came from gross tentacle monsters? There were worse things out there. Trust me.

“It might be cultured, but it’s genuine meat,” I told Kugi. “We can order more if we need to, so dig in.”

“Are you sure...? Isn’t this a luxury?”

“Kugi, quit worryin’ about it. If you’re gonna come with us, this is just the beginnin’.”

“His splurging never ceases to amaze,” Wiska sighed.

Mimi giggled. “I’m getting more used to splurging myself, but I’m frugal compared to Master Hiro and Elma.”

Can you all stop? You act like we throw money around like lunatics. We’re totally sane...for mercenaries. Compared to the average person, I don’t know.

“Anyway, how about we eat before it gets cold?” I urged.

“Okay! I’ll dish it up for everyone.”

“Ah! Allow me to help,” Kugi offered.

Elma stopped the shrine maiden. “Kugi, you’re our guest of honor today. Let us treat you. Even if Hiro’s calling your stay a trial period, this meal is basically a welcome party.”

She helped Mimi hand out plates of food. At some point, Mei started giving them a hand. *It’s crazy how she can pitch right in without so much as a word.*

“There you have it. It’s Kugi’s welcome party. Cheers, everyone.”

“Cheers!” Tina happily toasted and chugged her first drink. It was alcoholic, naturally. Wiska was discreetly drinking too...and apparently Elma was as well.

You girls don’t hold back, huh? That’s what I get for saying we could take it easy today.

After my welcome party, we returned to our lodgings. Lady Elma chased my lord off to the master bedroom, then declared, “Okay. Now that Hiro’s gone, let’s have a girls’ night.”

“Erm...are you sure that’s acceptable?”

“Of course!” Lady Elma said with a wave. “Hiro realizes what’s going on. He hid in the bedroom of his own volition.”

She headed to a cooler set up in the room. While I fretted, Lady Mimi, Lady Tina, and Lady Wiska retrieved drinks and snacks and gathered at the table.

I tried to help, but Lady Mei stopped me. “Please wait here, Miss Kugi.”

She was a mechanical doll known as a “Maidroid,” and I felt no spiritual vibrations within her. Frankly, she was a little frightening; she looked human, so the lack of spiritual vibrations made her eerie. When she looked at me, my tails bristled with fear.

“Drinks, check! Snacks, che—wait, Mimi. The hell is that?”

“Canned local food from the Maroukit System!”

“Okay, confiscated. Mei, keep this away from her.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Noooo!”

Tina snatched the mysterious can away from the table, handing it to Mei as Mimi grieved. Everyone’s demeanors were so soothing and joyful. Yet there was also an air of tension among them—surely because of me.

“Is juice fine, Kugi?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you very much, Lady Wiska.”

She smiled back at me. The dwarves seemed much less tense and wary with me than Mimi or Elma did. They were apparently far more curious and interested.

“Okay. Everyone’s got drinks. Cheers!” Taking the lead, Elma signaled the

beginning of the girls' night.

"Ain't it annoyin' tryin' to sound people out and stuff? Let's be blunt here. Elma, does this mean what I think it means?"

"Well, yeah," Elma replied. "Kugi, Hiro seems willing to take you with him, and I have no intention of objecting. Mimi?"

"Me neither. Master Hiro often brings girls along, and he's never been wrong about who he added to the crew or got together with. If he brings in Kugi, I don't have any reason to balk."

"Mimi and I are on the same page," Elma emphasized. "If Hiro were just a horndog, we'd have to tighten the reins a little, but he's not. Otherwise, we couldn't relax onboard today." She sipped from her cup, gazing into space. I couldn't discern the details on her mind, but she seemed to be imagining potential futures, or perhaps ruminating on the present. "Cheers to your new, free life, Kugi. I mean it. Also, I have a question for you."

"Of course. Ask me anything, and I will do my best to answer."

"Yeah? Okay, I'll go right ahead. I can't get this one question out of my mind. Earlier today, you met Hiro for the first time, right? So why did you already feel such affection...*devotion*? It is devotion, isn't it?"

"That's exactly right. Ever since I learned about my lord... Ah!" Of course. I'd overlooked something. Back home, it was natural for people to know their soulmate in advance, but that wasn't the case in foreign realms. "Um, my homeland possesses divination technology."

"Divination, huh...? Can you tell me more?"

"It's similar to fortune telling. Through divination, one can gain a foretaste of the aura of one's fated partner and the bliss one will feel near them. That is how I came to know my lord before meeting him." *Now they're sure to understand. Wait... Why is everyone looking at me with such suspicion?*

"All right, that sounds fishy as hell."

“It’s like a power from my holo-novels!”

“Tech in Verthalz is different from ours. It might strike us as fishy, but for those folk, it could be normal.”

“Maybe the ‘divination’ we know of is entirely different from theirs.”

What does this all mean? It’s as if my words didn’t reassure them at all. That was the truth, so how do I get them to understand?

“That may be the case. Sheesh...whatever.” Elma moved on. “So, how did you feel when you met him for real? It must’ve felt different from ‘divination,’ right?”

“Naturally. When I first saw him from afar, I felt deep relief and satisfaction, as if I’d finally found my other half. And when I got closer, locked eyes and exchanged words with him... Those sharp eyes, the way his voice tickled my ears, and...” Abashed, I shut my mouth.

“And?” Elma urged me to continue.

It would be dishonest not to answer when I’d come so close. *Ergh... They’re going to think I’m disgusting.* “Er, well... It may be shameful, but his scent... I suppose it somehow shook my core,” I answered evasively. *That’s it. I can’t stop them from drawing lascivious conclusions now, but even I have a sense of shame—a final line I won’t cross. If they question me further, though, I...I’ll be forced to answer.*

“Ooh... You must have a good nose or somethin’.”

“Is that some kind of scent fetish?”

“So, when you smell Hiro, you can’t control yourself?”

“Ugh...um...right.” I regretted telling them mere minutes ago that I’d answer any questions they had. If I’d thought a little more, I could’ve anticipated this happening! How embarrassing it all was. My face burned. Why was I being forced to undergo such shame...? *No. This is just another trial before I can be with my lord forever.*

“His smell, huh? I can’t say I don’t get it,” Elma remarked.

“It’s so relaxing when he hugs me,” Mimi agreed.

“Mm, yeah. That’s true. Everyone reacts to scent, and it’s no surprise you’re more affected, Kugi. You have a strong sense of smell, right?”

“Ack...yes. I think my sense of smell *is* keener than foreigners’.”

It felt as if everyone was focused on my ears and tails. Those features probably seemed rare to them, since none had ears or tails like mine. It made me nervous, though. I was glad that I’d at least groomed well.

Suddenly, Tina asked me an incomprehensible question. “So is this, like, how you really are?”

“Ex-excuse me?” I couldn’t help replying blankly. “What do you mean?”



“Eh, you’ve just seemed kinda...uptight. Like ya got a steel rod in your spine. Not in a mean way. I mean more like...”

“You’re stately and composed,” said Wiska.

“Yeah, that!” Tina confirmed. “So, ya seemed kinda uptight, but now you’re all squishy and vulnerable.”

Squishy and vulnerable... Well, I suppose my ears are drooping, and my tails are dangling to the floor. “I-I cannot let my lord see me slovenly and unworthy! I always control myself. That’s a shrine maiden’s duty, after all!” I clenched my fists defensively. Why did they look at me with such pity? It was incomprehensible.

“What do you think?”

“Hmm... Might as well see how it goes, you know?”

“If it’s unbearable, we can come to her rescue. Though I doubt she’ll need it.”

“Hiro’s sure to notice first.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s sharp, but he’s not dense, either.”

They were huddled together, whispering about something. My ears picked it all up, but whether I understood the conversation was a different question. It seemed to be about my relationship with my lord... And it sounded as if they were on my side, so I refrained from pressing them on the details.

Mei had been staring at me for some time. It was making me uncomfortable. Noticing my gaze, she informed me, “I am collecting data.”

“O-okay,” I replied. I didn’t know what sort of data she was collecting. And why was *she* staring so intently at my ears and tails?

“Well, I don’t know if I get the whole picture, but I get the gist. Thoughts, everyone?” Elma asked.

“I agree with you,” Mimi said.

“I never cared that much,” Tina chimed in. “I mean, we’re in the same boat as

Kugi, right?”

“Yes,” Wiska agreed.

“I don’t think that’s really true anymore, but okay. Mei?”

“I have no concerns as long as Master is all right with it, Miss Elma.”

“Cool. Since we’re all seeing eye to eye, welcome aboard, Kugi. Oh—is it okay to call you that?”

“Y-yes! Anything you like is fine!”

It seemed everyone had accepted me. I couldn’t stop wagging my tails in joy. I was sure no one could blame me, but it was admittedly embarrassing that my tails revealed my emotions as though I was a child.

“Okay, I’ll call you Kugi too,” Mimi declared. “I’m looking forward to being your friend!”

“L-likewise, Lady Mimi!”

“Hey, we’ll live together from now on, so no more ‘lady’ stuff,” Elma interjected. “You can call me anything you want, as long as it’s not that.”

“Very well, Elma!”

“If we start worryin’ about titles, I’ll have to call Mimi and Elma ‘lady’ too,” Tina joked. “Or maybe an even higher rankin’ title!”

“Sis, hush! Oh—may I call you Kugi, too?”

“Yes, Wiska. Tina, what do you mean by ‘even higher ranking’?”

“Uh, we can talk about that later. After things calm down,” Elma interrupted. “Anyway, another toast to Kugi. Cheers!”

She again raised her glass. I was so relieved that they were all good people. We would have much to learn about each other, but I felt I could handle it. I accepted a rather strange-tasting drink, breathing a heartfelt sigh of relief.

After that, I was able to hear many candid stories about my lord. I got a little

overexcited and began asking questions eagerly, which led to my being teased.

The day after the girls' welcome party, I woke, had breakfast, and went straight to the Holy Verthalz Empire's so-called temple.

Hm? Last night? I didn't really know what had gone on. I'd slept alone while the girls partied together. They'd apparently talked about a lot of things I'd prefer not to hear, so I shrugged it off. Perhaps thanks to their efforts, though, the girls and Kugi had gotten to know each other way better than I'd expected. I was relieved that they'd gotten friendly so fast.

I only took Mei and Kugi along on the trip to the temple. The twins were at work at Space Dwergr, and I'd asked Mimi and Elma to go shop for us. According to Elma, Kugi had brought over the bare minimum clothing and personal effects. That concerned the other women. Mimi and Elma were apparently shopping mostly for things that they wouldn't need Kugi's input to buy; they'd bring the shrine maiden shopping sometime soon for the rest.

"Let me just say now, I don't want trouble with the Holy Verthalz Empire," I warned Mei. "I only want to get what answers I can."

"Yes, Master. Understood," Mei assented. Kugi peeked up at our faces with concern.

You don't have to be so worried. We can handle this.

"We'll treat them the same way we treat the Empire—be easygoing where we can," I said. "That doesn't mean meeting every crazy demand, but when it's possible, we can compromise. My hard line is anything that'll negatively affect future work. As long as that line isn't crossed, I'm flexible." By setting that clear boundary in advance, I could keep my head on straight when the discussion began.

Why would I compromise with Verthalz? Well, I could use the power of money or the threat of violence to outmaneuver private companies, other

mercenaries, and colony bureaucrats, but not an entire galactic empire. That was an enemy that a single merc couldn't hope to contend with.

"Anyway, that's the plan," I added. "Is that the building?"

"Yes," Kugi said proudly, spotting the building. "That's our temple."

Not to sound rude, but the structure stuck out like a sore thumb. It looked like a shrine, but the materials and decor had a high-tech vibe. Beyond the torii-like gate was a walkway. It appeared to be made of stone, although I didn't know whether the material was real. The walkway was lined with gravel; amazingly, plants sprouted out of it. At the other end was what looked like a large shrine with a few other buildings attached. The most eye-catching thing on the temple grounds was...

"What the hell is that?" I gaped.

In front of the shrine was an orb of purple smoke...no, flame? Either way, it was floating in midair. Was that orb made of some kind of condensed psionic energy? I definitely felt power emanating from it.

"I believe that is a communication device utilizing psionic technology," Mei replied. "Its workings are unclear, but that is how the Holy Verthalz Empire explained it to the Grakkan Empire."

"Really?"

To me, it looked like an evil interdimensional gate. But if Mei said it was a communication device, and Kugi didn't argue, Mei must be right. I'd heard that super-high-speed communicators, hyperspace communicators, and gateway communication network relays used tons of energy, so it made sense that a psionic tool serving the same purpose would contain that much power.

"We should go in," said Kugi. "They're already waiting."

"Okay." Kugi had evidently used her psionic abilities to contact whoever was in the shrine. I didn't comment on that, but I had to wonder what the range was on her telepathy or whatever. If I could learn a power like that, it might be

convenient.

Kugi guided us along the walkway into the shrine.

“Oh ho...”

The interior was similar to what I’d seen when Kugi connected our minds. There was a dirt floor at the entrance. Past that was a raised wooden area, tatami mats beyond, and an altar and ritual goods at the very back.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

Two people stood at the boundary between the dirt and wooden floors. One was a man in religious robes similar to Kugi’s, and the other was a woman with a curved sword like a katana at her hip. She wore a large-sleeved kimono and a hakama, combining grace and mobility. Maybe she was a military officer?

Neither were mere humans; they both had animal ears. The man’s looked like a wolf’s, and the woman’s... I couldn’t tell. They were a little rounder, so maybe she was a tanuki, raccoon, or weasel.

“Hi there. I’m Hiro,” I introduced myself. “Guess I’ve been causing a ruckus lately. This is Mei; you might’ve met her yesterday.”

Mei silently bowed. The wolf priest simply nodded coolly, but the round-eared, samurai-like woman glared threateningly at her.

Do they know each other...? I wondered. “Do you have a problem with Mei?”

“I have to apologize,” the priest said. “As a spiritual people, we don’t get along well with soulless machine intelligence. My companion is a military officer. She must be wary around such beings.”

“I see.” Any mental interference abilities they had wouldn’t work against an android like Mei. I didn’t know whether they fought using psionics, but if they were that wary, they must really have struggled with machine intelligence. “Thing is, we have zero interest in fighting you two, so don’t be so prickly. You don’t want to rub us the wrong way pointlessly, do you?”

“He is right. Konoha, control yourself, please.”

“Understood.” The samurai-like woman took a step back.

“Please come in. I would appreciate it if you removed your footwear.”

“Okay.” I obediently took off my shoes, then stepped onto the wooden floor. Mei and Kugi followed suit. Guided by the wolf priest, we knelt on the cushions laid atop the tatami. I sat cross-legged while everyone else sat seiza-style. “You’ve all got good posture,” I noted. “Sorry, I can’t really sit like that.”

“Don’t concern yourself over that. I understand you are accustomed to sitting in chairs,” the wolf priest replied. “Now, I’m sure you must have questions.”

He glanced at a group of shrine maidens in red hakama behind him, all of whom had animal ears of some kind atop their heads. The shrine maidens stepped forward with trays of tea and snacks. The latter were pointy and colorful, like konpeito. “I must apologize for my manners. My name is Kongou. I am a priest of the temple of Wyndas Tertius.”

“Konoha,” said the round-eared woman. “I guard this temple.”

“Pleasure to meet you both. You asked if I have questions, so can I assume you’re willing to answer them?”

“Within our ability. Imperfect as I am, I do not know everything. However, I promise to exert myself to answer you, Lord Hiro.”

“That’s enough for me. First, I want you to explain Verthalz’s attitude toward me fully. Kugi told me your perspective on my existence here, and I can’t say you misinterpreted it, although even I don’t know why I suddenly dropped into this universe. And I guess you all see me as having come from another universe, since you sent Kugi to me with that certainty.”

“You’re asking whether that’s true?” Kongou responded evenly.

Yup, he gets it. The people of Verthalz seem to think I’m some alien who dropped in from a greater universe. I don’t think they could prove that, though. Unless they can provide footage of me and the Krishna suddenly appearing in that empty sector in the Tarmein System.

“Exactly. Now, as for why Verthalz is protecting me—sticking me with Kugi, that is—I heard a little about that from Kugi herself. But I find it strange that you’d bother to raise her, then spend all the time, effort, and money necessary to send her to another empire, merely out of goodwill or as a reparation. An outsider like me doesn’t understand your lofty mission, so I’ll rest easier if you can tell me there’s a selfish side, or some unavoidable reason you need to do this.”

“You doubt our mission, Fallen One?” Konoha glared at me suspiciously.

She’s flattening her ears. Is that meant as intimidation? It’s so transparent it’s kind of cute.

“I’m just saying that, to me, it’s hard to see where you’re coming from. What’s a fact to you is a ‘maybe, I don’t know’ to me. And when you send me a cute girl, basically telling me to do whatever the hell I want with her, that’s obviously a little confusing for me, right? Is it that strange that I’m trying to figure out what you expect in return—your ulterior motive?” I thought it was a perfectly valid question.

“We would never—!” Konoha snarled.

“Konoha, calm yourself. It is only natural for those born under an omen to see and experience things differently from the rest of us. Our mission, sin, and punishment are all ours to bear; it is wrong to demand that others understand them as we do. Remember, Lord Hiro is a Fallen One.”

“Mmgh...very well.”

Kongou had managed to calm the raging Konoha. *Hmm. This guy seems like he gets it.*

“First, I understand your concerns,” Kongou told me. “In light of that, I assure you, our holy empire seeks nothing in return from you. If anything, we benefit from knowing that you’ll live a happy, peaceful life. More precisely, if you came to hate this universe, that would be a weighty problem for us.”

“I’ll need more details.”

“Of course. Between universes exists a great difference in potential. By ‘potential,’ I simply mean the density of existence. Your universe’s potential is difficult for us to grasp, but given the energy level I feel from you, I believe you fell from an extremely high-potential universe.”

“Potential, huh...?” That didn’t make much sense to me, but I got the rough idea. I’d wandered in from a place with a high “density of existence”—energy density or something—so people with psionic powers saw *me* as containing great energy. “If I weren’t happy, what trouble would it cause you?”

“If you were consumed by despair, and released all your potential into a universe you detested, that could tear a great rift in the universe’s fabric. It would destroy an entire star at least.”

“Okay, didn’t want to hear *that*,” I admitted. “Are you serious? Like, really? I’m a ticking, star-system-destroying time bomb?”

“Do not worry; it is only a possibility. We and Kugi are here to prevent such an eventuality.” Kongou smiled warmly. I didn’t know how trustworthy he was, but Verthalz was clearly a pioneer in the field of psionics. Assuming this was all false and ignoring it would be foolish.

“Proposing a catastrophic scenario to instill fear, then consoling the target to create emotional investment... That is a method commonly employed by scammers,” Mei said flatly, throwing a bomb into the conversation. Instantly, the tension in the chamber skyrocketed. “I simply made a general statement of fact. I do not mean to say with certainty that you are lying. Please do not take offense.”

Konoha was clearly emitting a dangerous aura. “Damn soulless doll! Are you shrugging off our mission?” she bared her fangs.

I didn’t know how strong a Verthalz officer like Konoha was, but if she tried to fight Mei, she’d be in trouble. The discrepancy in their mass and strength was way too much. If she wanted, Mei could literally fold a human body up—like,

four times over, bones be damned.

“Sorry for my Maidroid,” I said. “She can be a little overprotective.”

“I see I went too far.” Mei bowed.

Though Konoha kept showing her fangs, Kongou smiled kindly and shook his head. “No, no. It’s all right. We understand that you can’t trust us too easily. At any rate, so long as Lord Hiro can live in peace, we will be happy. I’ve heard that in olden times, our nation tried to secure, house, and protect Fallen Ones by force, but...”

“But?”

“There was an unfortunate misunderstanding, and things took a turn for the worse. Since then, it has been forbidden to take Fallen Ones into custody or try to control their actions. Thus, we have no intention of crossing your boundaries. Sending a shrine maiden such as Kugi to accompany you is a sort of insurance against the worst.”

“Insurance?”

“Yes. Put bluntly, she is present to sacrifice herself to save you from danger if needed.”

“Uh...” *Holy crap, this guy’s talking human sacrifice now. Even I’m disgusted.*

“Consider it evidence of just how crucial it is that we prevent Fallen Ones from despairing.”

“Maybe it’s weird for me to say this, but if Fallen Ones are that dangerous, wouldn’t it be fastest to just kill us in our sleep?”

“Before the protection plan was enacted, some five centuries ago, such measures were indeed attempted. Some were successful, but our nation suffered immense damage due to failed attempts. Fallen Ones typically harbor extremely powerful magic. If cornered, they often awaken to that magic in order to protect themselves.”

“Hunh...” So if their lives were in danger, their psionic abilities kicked in so

they could fight back in their final moments.

“In the end, that was a disaster. Worse, those attempts on Fallen Ones’ lives often resulted in the despair I have now mentioned repeatedly. Three star systems were destroyed, including two habitable planets.”

“Oh. That’s how you settled on the current approach, huh?”

“Correct. In the end, we decided that the best method was to support Fallen Ones wherever possible without interfering excessively. Furthermore, we take the second-best measure of dispatching a shrine maiden in case things take a turn for the worse. We do detest the fact that that places such a burden on individuals like Kugi...or, at least, I do.” Kongou looked at her.

She shook her head in response. “Thank you, Father Kongou, but I’m happy I can serve my lord.”

“I appreciate you saying so, but...” I struggled to deal with Kugi’s straightforward adulation.

Konoha seemed confused and unhappy. “Fallen One...Lord Hiro, are you dissatisfied?” she asked me. “From a fellow woman’s perspective, I believe Kugi is a perfectly appealing young lady.”

Appealing, huh? That’s not wrong. Kugi’s definitely cute, and she seems nice. “I’m not ‘dissatisfied’ at all. Just struggling under the weight of all this responsibility. One word of mine will decide Kugi’s future. If I accept her role, she’ll serve me forever. If I refuse, she’ll be disposed of, won’t she? I don’t know what that means, but given your attitude toward your mission, I doubt she’ll be treated *well* for failing. So whatever I choose, Kugi’s fate is in my hands. Am I wrong?”

“Not at all,” Kongou said. “However, I can offer a detail that may help clear your doubts, Lord Hiro.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Kugi and Konoha have seemingly forgotten this—perhaps because it is so

normal to them—but our country has made great strides in magicology. What you know as ‘psionics.’”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard.” I knew, and had experienced, Verthalz’s psionics firsthand. I’d engaged with Kugi’s telepathic abilities, and I’d seen her use the temple’s long-range communication device. It was easy to imagine that her homeland’s psionic tech was formidable.

“One arena of magicology involves predicting fate and the future. We haven’t yet developed far-future prediction, but it is possible to divine general aspects of the future, what path one should take in life, and the results one can expect from said path.”

“Verthalz decides people’s futures through divination? Seriously...? Does that mean Kugi became a shrine maiden, living to serve a total stranger, because of divination?”

“Yes, my lord. I was born, and lived to this day, entirely to serve you.” She turned her innocent, confident gaze toward me.

I reeled back a little. “Whoa.”

“Lord Hiro, the future is not a singular thing. It diverges into countless complex branches based not just on one’s own choices and actions, but how they interact with the choices and actions of others. Amid those, Kugi found the future she desired, walking that path to arrive at this very moment. No one forced her; she did it of her own free will.”

“I-I see. Hmm...”

It came as a surprise that she’d chosen to pursue that path to this point, but maybe that would be normal in Verthalz, since they’d systematically developed divination technology. If they predicted the future with near certainty rather than through mere guesswork, then basing your lifestyle on those predictions might’ve been viable. Either way, it was clear that Kugi had thought about this, and that she wanted it much more than I expected.

“Okay, I get it. For now, let’s say I’ll accept her on my ship. That decision will ultimately depend on how well she gets along with the crew. But just so you know, if you demand her back after I’ve let her join, you’re not getting her.”

“No, of course not.” Kongou’s smile broadened. “Now, with that settled, shall we discuss more practical matters?”

Chapter 5:

In Search of Lightweight Power Armor

THE HOLY VERTHALZ EMPIRE agreed to cover any financial burdens or diplomatic negotiations with the Grakkan Empire that arose from my decision to bring Kugi along. And now that she was basically part of the crew, I was happy to look after her personal financial needs. After completing those bureaucratic proceedings at the temple, we went back to the hotel and explained things to everyone else.

Elma responded more or less as I expected. “So, when all’s said and done, you pretty much decided to let her join.”

Well, yeah, but... Okay, maybe I was the idiot for using her hotel stay as the trial.

Beside me, Kugi bowed. “Mimi. Elma. I look forward to a lasting friendship.” Based on how her ears stood up, she was either nervous or eager.

“Yeah. Good to have you aboard, Kugi.” Elma smiled.

Kugi’s tails wagged madly. “Indeed!”

I’m glad they’re getting along. Letting them have that girls’ party last night was for the best. Good judgment, me.

“We’ll get along great, Kugi. If you have any questions, come to me!”

“Thank you, Mimi.”

“Oh yeah—we bought you a bunch of things. Um, this one here is...” Mimi had started off guarded around Kugi, but was now accepting her into the fold perfectly naturally. That wasn’t a bad thing, but I felt like I’d have to keep tabs on her.

Noticing my gaze, Elma whispered an explanation. “Mimi thought about what could’ve happened to *her* if you hadn’t helped out. So did I, at that. Neither of

us could bear to refuse Kugi the same opportunity. Being ‘disposed of’ doesn’t sound fun.”

Aha. Well, if they’re going to get along, that’s perfectly fine by me. It’s a relief that everyone’s making a point of accepting Kugi.

“So, Mei,” said Elma. “Did everything look fine?”

“Yes, Miss Elma. I observed nothing suspicious.”

“No? Good.”

“What’re you talking about?” I asked them.

“I told Mei to watch for brainwashing or other funny business. If Verthalz had evil intentions, you entering their stronghold would’ve been a perfect opportunity for them.”

“Makes sense.” That was fair; after all, I’d sent Mei *and* Elma together to help Kugi yesterday for the same reason.

While we talked, the door opened. Tina and Wiska had returned.

“We’re back! Oh, hon’s back, too.”

“Hi, everyone.”

“Welcome back. You’re early, huh?”

“They ain’t finished peer-reviewin’ our report yet, but they gotta check it against the ship itself, so they want to work with just their people for now.”

“We didn’t do much beyond answering questions today. The real work will be from tomorrow onward, so we were able to leave early.”

I *had* warned Argatt not to run the twins ragged. “Is it just me, or is Space Dwergr acting scared of us?” I mused.

“Of course they’re scared, hon. They ain’t gonna piss off someone who handed us more’n 3,000,000 Ener like it was nothin’.”

“No?” As far as I could figure, 3,000,000 Ener converted to hundreds of

millions of yen. It sure would take courage to pick a fight with someone that wealthy. I would've avoided that at all costs when I lived in Japan, at least. "Wait. Does Space Dwergr treat me internally as someone they need to steer clear of?"

"I'm not too worried about it, but yeah," Tina answered, unfazed.

"Ah ha ha..." Wiska laughed nervously, but seemed a little troubled.

That *would* probably make things awkward at their workplace for a while, but they'd just have to overcome it together. It would only last a week or two, anyway.

"Sounds rough," said Elma. "So, what's the plan today? Hang out in the hotel room?"

"Yeah. I'm a little tired," I replied. "I think I'll laze around and look at the power armor catalog or something."

"Really? Okay, then. I'll laze around too."

"That sounds nice," Mimi chimed in.

"I'm gonna go change. Our work getup's too stiff to get comfy in."

"Yeah. Same here."

The dwarves headed into the back. The penthouse's living room connected to the master bedroom and three other bedrooms. Elma and Mimi were staying in one, Tina and Wiska in another, and Kugi in the last. The master bedroom was mine. As for Mei, she was rooming with Kugi, but she spent most of her time in the living room.

"Damn," I said, "I'm exhausted."

"Was the temple that bad?" Elma asked.

"Apparently, I'm a star-system-destroying time bomb."

"Uh, what?"

"If I sink to the depths of despair and die hating this universe, that could

destroy a system. Or so they say. Who the hell knows?" I slumped into the comfy sofa.

Elma perched next to me, tablet in hand. "Sounds like a big deal." She seemed to sit a little closer than usual—close enough to gently brush against me—maybe because she was worried about me. "But no point worrying about a problem *that* big. We're just mercenaries. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Good point."

Talking to her, I felt my brain—which had been floating around listlessly, flummoxed by the sheer scale of all this—start to clear. *Yeah, change your perspective here. Rather than worrying about a crazy story that might not even be true, it'd be a lot more constructive to think about that power armor so you can protect yourself.*

Relaxing in the living room, we researched lightweight power armor. None of the suits in the catalogue stood out as matching my needs at all, though.

"Now that I'm really looking, there aren't a whole lot of options," I noted.

"No. Even fewer when you narrow it down to suits meant for sword fighting."

I was looking for lightweight power armor with the ability to boost my strength and agility, sufficient plating to protect me from bullets and lasers, and enhanced environmental adaptability. I also wanted to maintain the precision and accuracy I had without armor.

In the catalogue, I found more than I was looking for in terms of enhanced protection, strength, and agility, but every suit of armor's precision fell short. I didn't want to compromise on that; it was an extremely important part of swinging a sword, at least to me.

"I mean, is it even *necessary* for nobility to wear power armor?" I wondered.

Elma cocked her head. "I wouldn't say no outright, but the lightweight armor on the market doesn't seem like a good fit for nobles."

The armor in the catalog offered environmental adaptability, shields, jump

units that let wearers fly short distances, booster units for rapid acceleration, thin plating, and occasional stealth specialization equipment. We just couldn't find anything made for close-quarters, sword-based combat.

Tina and Wiska returned from changing clothes, sat on the couch across from us, and joined the conversation.

"Normal power armor can't provide free movement neither, but that's a whole 'nother kettle of fish, right?" said Tina. "Thing is, noble folk already have augmentations that give 'em tons of strength and improve their reaction speed, don't they? I doubt power armor for a normal, unaugmented human could keep up with a noble's moves."

"Agreed, Sis. Normal power armor means your physique is bulkier. You give up nimbleness in the process. And don't you think nobility would want power armor honed specifically for their needs?" Wiska had started spreading the contents of a pouch on the table, including a brush and hair ties. Presumably she planned to do Tina's hair; sometimes they liked to style each other's to shake things up. *Wonder what looks they'll try this time.*

Meanwhile, Mimi was discussing something with Kugi at another table. Mei was with them, so I doubted there was cause for concern, but what were they getting so excited about over there? *Guess I should be glad Mimi's talking to her enthusiastically. I'll leave them be, though I am curious.*

"If we can't find decent armor, do you think I should undergo augmentation?" I asked Elma.

"Mm...it might be a good idea. But if you do, you won't be able to work for a few months."

Speaking from experience, huh? As a member of the Willrose family, and by extension Imperial nobility, Elma had undergone bodily augmentation herself. That was why her thin arms were so much stronger than mine. The process had only boosted her physical capabilities and reaction speed; she hadn't gotten the brain processing speed upgrade that heads of households got.

“When they perform augmentation, how does it actually work?”

“It depends whether you’re getting bionic or cybernetic augmentation, but they’re similar in that both are irreversible and fundamentally enhance your body.”

“Okay. They have distinctive traits, though, right?”

“I don’t know everything about augmentation either,” Elma replied. “But the raw results of bionics-based treatments are typically inferior. The treatment time is longer, and afterward, your body takes longer to acclimate to the bionics. Still, they’re easier to maintain, and they strain the body less. Also, the more you train, the stronger the augmentations get. Cybernetics treatments augment you way more quickly, and people say you see the effects right after the procedure. You can’t train them like bionics, but you *can* upgrade them. They’re also not perfectly maintenance-free, so that takes up some time.”

“Gotcha. You’re bionically augmented, right, Elma?”

“Yep. Bionics are more common here in the Empire. The nobility apparently doesn’t like the thought of replacing body parts with machines.” Elma shrugged.

I’d heard that Imperial nobles had a general distaste for machine intelligence. It made sense that they didn’t want to become more similar to machines by replacing body parts with cybernetics.

While we discussed options, Mimi and Kugi stopped chatting and came over. Mimi had Kugi sit next to me, across from Elma, then sat on her other side.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Kugi was interested in your conversation.”

“Oh? Wonder why.” I looked at Kugi, who appeared a little apologetic.

She spoke up timidly. “Er, I heard you talking about augmentation surgery... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.” I glanced at her big, twitching animal ears. *Those do look like they hear better than a normal human’s. Wonder how they compare*

to Elma's elf ears.

"My lord, Mimi told me that you would like to wear a suit of armor called 'power armor' to improve in combat. Is that true?"

"Yeah, that's right. I can't find any that I like, so we were discussing whether I should look into bodily augmentation."

"I see. I don't mean to meddle in your affairs, but I don't believe that's necessary."

"You don't? Got a reason for that?"

"Yes. The potential surging within you is currently being released unutilized. If you can control it, however, it should shield you much better than any 'power armor.'"

"Uh..."

Everyone besides Kugi and Mei made the same sound I had.

"Um, did I say something odd?" Kugi cocked her head, confused.

"No. I'd just kind of abandoned that general direction."

"Abandoned?"

"Yeah. I mean, think about it. If a guy without power armor wielded physical power *greater* than that provided by power armor, and unleashed some weird attack that blew away a mountain while magically deflecting lasers and bullets, people would obviously find that weird, right? By letting others see something that insane, I'd be begging for trouble. I think it's safer to avoid developing my strength in that direction and instead use something like armor so I don't reveal my power level."

Kugi nodded in understanding. After a moment's thought, she replied, "Mimi told me a bit about this 'power armor.' As far as I can judge, people from my country fight with similar or greater strength without such equipment. I don't think it's remarkable myself."

“Ugh. Really? Scary.” *Is that “Konoha” lady from the temple that strong? Got it—don’t underestimate military officers from Verthalz.*

“I believe you could wield power capable of felling whole armies of our soldiers, my lord. If your only concern is that you would be conspicuous, could you not simply use *less* power?”

Under the immense weight of Kugi’s innocent gaze, I wavered. “Well...maybe, but...”

To be fair, it wasn’t my style to abandon a potential ability and avoid the optimal way of doing something just because I was scared of standing out. I needed to use every resource I could. Yet... “I mean, you make me sound like a Super Sa**an! I always thought it’d be cool to fly around shooting Kamehameha waves, but that doesn’t mean I want to do it in real life!”

“Super Salmon...?” Kugi looked perplexed.

I know, me referencing media from my world out of nowhere is confusing, right?

“I don’t know what a Kame or a Meha is, but blowing an entire mountain away seems...inefficient,” she continued. “If you intend to consume potential with an attack, I believe neutralizing a foe with high-intensity telepathy is much more efficient.”

“Whoa. Now you’re scaring me. What the hell is high-intensity telepathy?”

“It focuses great pressure on a target’s mind to knock them unconscious. Depending on the intensity, it could essentially poison their mind. With your potential, I think you could easily affect this entire colony with such a method.”

“Hate it. I don’t want to radiate poison or something.”

“Hon, you’re thinkin’ about it all wrong,” Tina cut in. “Regardless of your feelin’s, Kugi’s got a point, don’t she? You gave up on that kind of stuff ‘cause you didn’t wanna spend months trainin’ in the Leafil System. But if Kugi’s comin’ with us, why not let her teach ya over time?”

“That’s right,” Wiska agreed. “Why not buy power armor *and* develop those powers? It’s not as if you’ll be worse off for learning them.”

I was surprised that the science-loving dwarf twins seemed on board with the “make me superhuman” plan. *Shouldn’t that conflict directly with their values? Weird.*

“Honestly,” said Tina, “I’m kinda curious about that psionic technology.”

“It’s a totally different system, after all,” Wiska agreed. “If you learn to control those ‘superpowers,’ we might make incredible discoveries.”

“Wow. You’re led totally by idle interest, huh? Aren’t you worried about me?” I whined.

“I mean, your body’s already producin’ ‘potential,’ ain’t it? Accordin’ to Kugi, anyway. Ain’t it easier and better if ya don’t have to mess with augmentin’ it and stuff?”

“She’s got a point,” said Elma. “I got augmented when I was little, but it’s rough after the treatment until your body acclimatizes. And it hurts a lot, you know. You can’t move for three months minimum. Plus, it’s way pricier than power armor.”

I groaned. Controlling my “potential”—training my psionic abilities—and becoming safer as a result seemed like hitting two birds with one stone. If Kugi joined our travels, we could take the training slowly too. She was right that I could avoid standing out if I learned to control my powers. No problem, right? *Right?*

“Okay, fine. I’ll sign on for this change of plan. No to augmentation, yes to power armor. That’s the strategy for now.”

“I think it’s the best idea,” Elma said.

“In that case, we still need to find lightweight power armor that suits you,” Mimi reminded me.

That was the problem. If none of the armor on the market met my needs, my

only option was to have something made to order. I didn't know where to begin. Should I ask some random armor manufacturer? Or could I think of another way? *Hmm.*

The next day, I made a call and explained my situation.

"And that led you to me, I assume."

"Yes, dear brother-in-law," I said with a smile.

The pretty boy on the other end of the holo-display scowled. "I frankly detest when you call me that."

"Now, now, don't be that way. Your adorable little brother-in-law called you because he had nobody else to rely on."

"You are not adorable. Not one bit!"

The attractive elf frowning on the other end of the holo-display was Elma's big brother, Ernst Willrose, who lived in the capital. The Wyndas System was close to the capital—relatively, anyway. Since it was a high-tech industrial system, we could contact the capital in real time via hyperspace communication. From a little farther away, that would be impossible; we'd either have to pay an obnoxious fee to use the gateway network communication system or give up on real-time communication altogether.

If you weren't set on real-time communication, you could use a hyperspace communication relay to transmit holo-message data or send data packets via old-fashioned physical media. Interstellar communication was kind of a challenge.

"That said, I am willing to help if it will make Elma safer. Besides, I'm sure she'd be unhappy if you died."

"Aw, thanks, bro. You get me."

"Stop calling me that... Ugh, forget it. Yes, there's a power-armor manufacturer that serves sword-revering nobility."

“Nice! That’s great news.”

Nobles called “sword supremacists” basically believed in the “good old days,” idealizing and emulating powerful aristocrats of those times. Swords had been a hallmark of Grakkan nobility, and what complemented a sword? That’s right—armor.

Apparently, here in the Grakkan Empire, swords symbolized authority, while armor symbolized wealth. Back on Earth, I’d read that the armor medieval knights and aristocrats wore was expensive as hell; this was similar, but on a grander scale.

“First-time customers are typically turned away,” Ernst continued. “And they don’t do business with commoners.”

“Sounds like a crappy business plan to me.”

“If you are nobility *and* have a letter of introduction, that changes things.”

“Will it be okay that I’m just honorary nobility?”

“Most likely. You have a title, and you displayed your fighting prowess at the tournament. Since His Majesty himself knows your face, I doubt they’ll reject you.”

With that, my dear brother-in-law sent over a data packet—seemingly his letter of introduction. He also sent map data with the shop location marked. For all his attitude, he was a nice guy. I was practically falling in love.

“Their home office is in the capital, but there’s a branch in the Wyndas System as well. A number of military nobles are stationed there, after all.”

“Do many military nobles wear armor into battle?”

“Even among sword supremacists, there are realists. There’s a limit to how many times you can dodge lethal lasers, and if just one strikes, it guarantees a bad injury at best. Personal shield capacity is limited as well, and not every noble wants to carry a heavy generator around the battlefield. The natural solution is to wear power armor with a generator installed, isn’t it?”

“I guess...” Part of me had to wonder why these “sword supremacist” guys didn’t just give up on sword-fighting, but to be fair, swords *could* be more effective than laser guns or rifles in some situations.

“At any rate, you may discuss the details there. I’m a busy man, so I must be going.”

“Thank you, dear brother-in-law. I owe you one.”

He snorted. “In that case, come by the capital with Elma once in a while. Mother and Father will be happy to see her too.”

“I’ll think about it.” I saluted sharply.

Big bro Ernst sighed and hung up. *Hey, heaving that sigh at the end wasn’t necessary! He’s right, though. We should stop by the capital sometimes. That bastard Emperor will probably make us go see him, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it. I’m a good guy who repays kindness, after all.*

“Okay,” I muttered. “Time to call the gang.”

I was alone in the hotel. The girls were off buying everyday items for Kugi that they hadn’t been able to get the day before. There were things that you couldn’t really buy without the person in question present, after all—like underwear.

Well, not *all* the girls were shopping, since the mechanic twins were at work. Being an employed adult was rough.

“Anyway, that’s how I got info on the shop and this letter of introduction. From my dearest brother-in-law.”

“Yay!” Mimi applauded.

“I thought we’d hit a dead end, and you went and called my brother of all people.” Elma smiled reluctantly.

After learning about that power-armor shop from Ernst, I’d called the crew.

Once they finished shopping for Kugi, we met for drinks.

I glanced at Mei. She shook her head slightly. I'd asked her to keep an eye on Kugi and make sure she wasn't using psionics to control Mimi or Elma. From Mei's reaction, she hadn't noticed anything shady. I doubted Kugi *would* do anything like that, but Mei believed we should remain cautious. Maybe I was putting her in a bad spot by trusting Kugi so readily. I'd have to make that up to her somehow.

"Do you plan to see this armorer soon, my lord?" asked Kugi.

"I'm thinking about it." I sipped from a cup made of some plastic-like material.

"I understand. I look forward to seeing the quality of power armor forged by the Empire's smiths."

My drink had an uncanny flavor. It was like sweet milk tea, but oddly spicy. Had they added seasonings? I'd never tried Indian chai tea back on Earth, but maybe this was similar.

"Ow! Hot!" Kugi, who apparently had a sensitive tongue, blew on the tea desperately. It was kind of cute.

Mimi smiled at Kugi. *I get it. You never get tired of watching her ears and tails twitch and bob around, right?*

"Okay. Quick break, and then we get going before this place offers us tea over rice."

"Tea over rice?"

"Yeah. Um...it's a thing from the place I used to live." I tried to explain that a host who offered you that wanted you to get the hell out. Since that didn't apply in this universe, it was really just a dumb inside joke with myself.

We passed the time with idle conversation like that until Kugi's tea cooled enough for her to finish.

After that, we headed to the shop Ernst had told me about. There, a middle-aged man dressed like a butler greeted us. “Welcome.”

The vibe was more like a high-end tailor than a power-armor shop. The spotless carpets were dyed cool colors, and much of the interior was made of real or imitation wood. There were no holo-displays, although those seemed common in this kind of shop.

Then again, although I had the impression that holo-displays were ubiquitous, the only similar place I’d actually been was a gun store. It’d had a dizzying number of displays practically covered in products from all kinds of manufacturers. The lack of visual overstimulation here, though, was frankly almost unsettling.

“May I ask whether this is your first time here?” the man continued.

“Yeah. I have a letter of introduction.” I used my handheld information terminal to send the employee the data from Ernst.

He checked the details on his own tablet. “I see. From Viscount Willrose’s family?” The employee—maybe owner?—glanced at Elma, who shrugged. “I know about you, Captain Hiro.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“His Majesty’s tournament was broadcast live here in the Wyndas System. Many valued customers participated.”

“Got it. Did I do something that pissed you off?” In the end, I’d won every event in that tournament. That meant all the guy’s customers had been defeated, either by me or someone else.

“It was a fair and honest fight. I have no reservations whatsoever about it, and nothing but respect for you.”

“In that case, enough chitchat. Let’s get to brass tacks. I’m a crude merc, as you know—I’m no good at polite small talk.”

“Understood. Ladies and gentleman, right this way.”

He led us to a meeting space near the back. It wasn't as classy as the Imperial castle, but it wasn't too far off. The shipyard lounge had been luxurious in a different way; the ambience there was cutting-edge and comfortable, while this chamber was classy and old-fashioned.

Once we were relaxing on a plush sofa, the man sat on another sofa across from us and got to the point. "If you've chosen to come to our business, I trust you don't need the products we sell explained?"

I shook my head. "Actually, I'm in the dark about power armor beyond the standard infantry kit. I have no idea what nobles' power armor is like, so I'd appreciate an explanation."

"Understood." He tapped his tablet. A holo-display appeared on the seemingly antique wooden table. Despite its appearance, the table only emulated old-fashioned carpentry; it was a modern appliance with a holo-display installed. "We handle made-to-order power armor, and we pride ourselves on delivering one-of-a-kind items tailor-made to perfectly suit our customers' physiques and needs."

"That's got to be expensive, huh?" I said half-jokingly.

He responded sincerely. "There *is* quite a price tag, of course. At least 200,000 Ener."

"Hmm... Well, that doesn't sound too bad on its own."

Now I felt dumb for being so cautious. If he'd quoted me 2,000,000 Ener, it might've startled me. But however many functions and features I added to my armor, there was no way I'd jack the bill up to ten times the price. The middle-aged man's eyes widened at my words.

"We may not look it, but we make good money," I added. "Even if that's pricey for armor, it's not much compared to a ship. Right?"

"Not really," Elma agreed. "Fully customizing even the lowest-class ship, we'd blow through ten times that easily."

The man couldn't conceal his shock. "Goodness me..."

The best commercial power armor on the market cost 100,000 Ener. Hell, you could snag a used suit for under 10,000 Ener. By those standards, 200,000 Ener *was* exorbitant. That could cover two suits of cutting-edge, high-performance armor, or even four or five standard suits. And if you ignored quality, you could...maybe not outfit a small army, but at least purchase more than ten suits.

"So budget isn't a concern," I concluded. "Just give us the best you've got, okay?"

"Very well, sir. This is shaping up to be an unexpectedly large sale." The man flashed a delighted grin. "Our armor shares standard power armor's basic features. In other words, the suit's purpose is to secure defensive plating to your meager flesh and allow ample freedom of movement despite donning such heavy equipment. In some cases, you might elect to add jump units or optical camouflage, or increase your firepower with fixed armaments."

He used his tablet to showcase several power armor designs on the table's holo-display.

"Compared to the power armor on the market, those are awfully sleek," I noted.

"We tailor our armor to fit the wearer. Commercial power armor is one-size-fits-all, but bespoke armor can't be made that way, since it's your own personal second skin."

"I see. Seems like it'd be hard to wear if your physique changed much." Getting heavier would be the likeliest issue. That wouldn't be a concern for me, though, as long as I kept exercising like I did. And my growth spurt had ended long ago, so I wouldn't get taller anytime soon.

"No worries there," Elma said. "Nobles usually don't change from their ideal physique."

"Another benefit of augmentation, huh?"

“Master Hiro, I think I want to get augmented,” Mimi murmured, staring at Elma’s slim torso.

Mimi put a lot of effort into exercise. At first, she’d been so weak she could hardly do five push-ups, but she could easily do twenty now. Her routine was much more intense too. I suspected she wanted to lose weight, but I liked her as she was. In fact, she could even gain a little... *Okay, I can stop thinking about Mimi’s figure now.*

“If this armor is for nobles, you must design it for sword combat, right?” I asked.

“Yes. We strive to use the latest technology to improve comfort and allow a full range of movement in the joints. I presume you wish to use a sword?”

“That’s the plan. I have battle-ready combat armor, but it’s no good for sword-fighting. It doesn’t have the precision.”

“Indeed, power-focused commercial armor won’t accommodate the delicacy of swordplay. But I believe our armor will satisfy you in that regard.”

He sounded confident, but if I splurged and it turned out to be garbage, would he do anything?

“How does ordering usually work?”

“First, we decide on broad specifications. Afterward, we take measurements and diagnostics.”

“I understand measurements, but what diagnostics?”

“Well, we record your movements in battle, then feed the motion data into the armor to enhance your combat abilities by increasing your armor’s assistance efficiency.”

“Makes sense.”

I half got it. As long as the armor would work, I was happy to give them whatever diagnostics they wanted. At any rate, we still had to start with broad specs.

Chapter 6:

That Annoying Blonde

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to choose specs. After all, the features I wanted were crystal clear. My nonnegotiables were environmental adaptability and good precision of motion.

"Environmental adaptability" meant the armor could function without issue on partly terraformed planets, in ships and colonies that were no longer airtight, and in weather and atmospheres toxic to the human body. Basically all combat-ready power armor required that basic feature.

"Precision of motion" was just a measure of how power armor responded to the wearer's movements. If it responded slowly, you'd call it sluggish. If it moved far more than the wearer intended, it was oversensitive. It was possible to work with either if you were used to the suit, but overly sluggish armor ruined your reaction speed, and oversensitivity made your movements less precise. In other words, the best power armor kept pace with your body perfectly.

"Almost all our customers have similar demands. Of course, you may rest easy that we have the know-how to fulfill your needs."

The shopkeeper was referring to the diagnostic work he'd mentioned earlier. The establishment would adjust not only the armor's hardware, but its software as well.

"Maintainability will be important, too," I added.

"Technical aspects aside, maintainability will be quite difficult if we use cutting-edge materials."

"Then maybe we'll need extra parts or supplies to replace the equipment likeliest to wear out."

“If you prefer, we could perhaps tweak the design to prioritize easy maintenance.”

As he and I talked, Mimi, Elma, and Kugi looked excitedly at the power-armor samples.

“I thought power armor was always bulky and chunky. These are so sleek!”

“Yeah. Nobles tend to care a lot about appearances.”

I’d been surprised by the designs myself. In *Stella Online*, made-to-order power armor didn’t exist, so this was my first time seeing it.

“What fine armor,” said Kugi. “But wouldn’t its weight make you clumsy?”

“Power armor uses artificial muscles to prevent that,” Mimi replied. She began explaining the concept to Kugi, who didn’t understand the technology well.

Aw, cute. I remembered when Mimi had first come aboard the *Krishna*. Back then, I’d shown her around the ship and explained all its weapons.

“Okay, the basic specs look good,” I said. “Now we talk optional features, right? What have you got? My usual power armor has several fixed armaments, which is lots of firepower even without added weaponry.”

“Our technology allows for greater firepower without sacrificing precision of motion. Of course, there are limits. Adding too many fixed weapons increases the armor’s weight accordingly.”

“Got it. But thinking about the situations where I’ll use this power armor, it might not need much firepower.”

The Rikishi armor I already owned would do fine in normal combat. In fact, so long as I wasn’t up against an enemy that demanded a sword, it’d be more comfortable to overwhelm them with the Rikishi’s combination of pure power and tough armor. In short, if I got a second suit of power armor, I could gear it toward speed and stealth instead.

“Let’s change our thinking a little,” I said. “On top of environmental

adaptability and precision of motion, I want to emphasize stealth and mobility.” I couldn’t expect those qualities from the Rikishi, after all. It’d be a waste if I got power armor that half-assed those specs just because I was hung up on firepower.

“Very well. Stealth and mobility, hm? Quite a dangerous order.” The shopkeeper gave me a sly grin.

I had to raise an eyebrow. “Really? Wouldn’t it be more dangerous if I told you it should fire lasers, plasma, or grenades?”

Elma smirked at me too. “Depending how you look at it, noble power armor geared toward stealth and mobility could come off as custom-designed for assassination. Of course he thinks it’s dangerous.”

“Oh. I see.” It felt as if the scales had fallen from my eyes. Using stealth and agility to slip through security and kill someone silently with your sword *was* basically the definition of assassination. “Well, at any rate, those are the specs I want.”

“You won’t budge at all on them?” Mimi asked.

I shrugged. “Why would I?”

Frankly, I didn’t care how this armor came off to others. I wasn’t a noble who valued reputation; I was a mercenary who risked my life for money. People could call it cowardly or dirty—that was music to my ears. After all, whoever survived was the winner. If I quibbled over how I fought or won, I could die in the process, so there was no point to that.

As for the final specs, I first settled on laminar anti-laser armor, a cutting-edge design that prevented explosive vaporization when subjected to laser fire. It could take three laser-rifle shots and still protect the squishy flesh beneath. Apparently, the shop could produce the laminar armor thanks to a new and very bountiful source of rare crystals.

“Rare crystals... Are you two thinking of...?”

“Yeah. That’s probably it.”

“It must be.”

I bet we’re all picturing the same thing right now: the Mother Crystal, that stupid-huge sea urchin crystal that dazzled in the light of the pulsar.

Beyond that, the armor specs included the highest-quality artificial muscles available. The suit’s muscular capacity was nothing compared to the Rikishi’s, but still far beyond an unarmed human’s. It also excelled in explosive strength; even weighed down by a full set of equipment, it could run eighty kilometers per hour for long periods of time. On top of that, it was extremely quiet.

“Looks like it’ll take a lot of training to get used to,” I said.

“Some, to be sure. However, by loading your motion data in advance, we can reduce the required labor greatly.”

“Works for me.”

The armor would include a compact high-output generator and shield functionality. Multifunction camouflage too. That was even better optical camouflage than the chameleon thermal mount. It allowed the user to deceive infrared and electromagnetic vision, as well as normal vision, and could trick other types of detection as well.

“Still, if you move too violently, that will decrease the camouflage effect significantly,” the shopkeeper warned.

“Can’t be *perfectly* invisible, huh?”

Considering this universe’s technology, you’d think they would’ve developed flawless camouflage. Still, even if this was a high-end shop for nobles, it was a private business. They probably couldn’t get their hands on top-secret military tech, so maybe this *was* the best I could hope for.

“It really does seem like something an assassin would use,” Elma said.

“Cool, right?”

We added a high-powered grappling hook and an anti-laser smokescreen feature.

To me, at least, the mechanized grappling hook was the most obvious “cool thing that seems impossible” element. It shot a wired hook into walls and ceilings, then pulled you right over. The wire itself was a bundle of extremely sturdy artificial muscle. Combined with a high-output motor, it could lift power armor and wearer alike. It was pretty much a cross between a chameleon’s tongue and a hoist.

As for the anti-laser smokescreens, those would greatly impact laser weapons. I could carry up to four at a time, two per arm. There was a limit to how many times I could use each, though, so I’d have to choose my moments.

“Cool!” Mimi gushed over the power armor design.

On the other hand, Kugi seemed to dislike it. “Is there nothing you can do about the generally...villainous impression it gives off?”

Admittedly, I’d gotten carried away and made it look like ninja gear. It wasn’t that bad, though, and the pure-white-and-silver designs a knight might’ve worn just didn’t suit me.

“It can change colors with the chameleon function,” I said defensively.

“I don’t believe its color is the problem... No. I apologize, my lord. It’s presumptuous of me to offer my opinions unprompted.”

“Hey, you’re free to weigh in.” *I’m not changing the design, though. Sorry. Still, it’s weird how my power armor designs look like a sumo wrestler and a ninja respectively. Maybe that’s fine, since I kind of have a theme going. Should I make samurai-style armor next?*

With the specs decided, the shopkeeper said, “Let’s proceed to capturing the motion data. Hm...?”

He stopped and put his hand to his left ear, as if listening to something. *Is*

there a miniature communicator in there?

“I’m sorry. A customer with a reservation has arrived a little early. Would you mind if I speak with them for a minute?”

“No prob. We’re the ones who showed up without an appointment, after all.”

“Thank you very much. Excuse me.” The shopkeeper bowed his head, rose from his seat, and left the meeting room.

“Once we get motion data, we’re done here,” I told the girls. “Want to go shopping or anything?”

“Hmm. Good question.” Elma thought. “I don’t need anything, but some random window-shopping sounds fun.”

“Yeah!” Mimi piped up. “I want to window-shop!”

“Window...shop?” Kugi cocked her head. She clearly had no idea what the hell that meant.

“It’s when you wander around looking for neat stuff at shops, but without a serious goal. If we like something enough, though, we usually buy it on the spot.”

“I see.”

As we talked, I heard the shopkeeper returning. *Hm? Is that a second set of footsteps?*

“Pardon me. This customer here...”

When I saw who’d come in with him, I couldn’t help but groan. “Eugh!”

“Ack!” said Mimi, startled.

“Ugh...” Elma put a hand on her brow and sighed.

A blonde-haired, red-eyed beauty in white military dress frowned down at me, arms crossed. “What does it mean when you ‘eugh’ at someone when you see them? Explain your ‘eugh.’” Hers was a face I knew well by now. Her military cap appeared to have a little more decoration than before.

“It’s been a long time,” I greeted her.

“Not particularly. We really run into each other far too often.”

“You’ve got that right, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“That’s Colonel to you. I’ve been promoted yet again. Really, I wish they’d slow down a little.” Lieutenant Colonel Serena—sorry, just Colonel Serena—furrowed her brow, flicking the brim of her cap. It seemed I was right to think that it was extra lavishly decorated now.

“Congrats on your promotion. What brings you here, Colonel?”

“For what reason other than power armor would I come? I showed up early since I had an opening in my schedule, and here I find the shopkeeper busy with a *walk-in*. Walk-ins are rare, I know, and when I asked about it, I learned that it was a *mercenary*.”

“Not many mercs out there need custom power armor for nobles *and* have connections that would get them into a place like this.”

“My thoughts exactly. That was why I asked the shopkeeper to introduce me to the merc. If only I’d asked a few more questions, I’d have known your whole crew would be here.” Serena’s gaze shifted to Kugi, who was staring at her too. They made eye contact. “Another one? Goodness, people like you are something else.” Colonel Serena looked at me as if I were living garbage.

“You’re not...wrong, but... Listen. I have complex circumstances, okay?”

“‘Complex circumstances,’ he says. Well, knowing you, I’m certain that’s correct.” She sighed.

Hey, stop. Don’t look at me that pityingly. And don’t act like I got dragged into more weird trouble. I’ll cry, because it’s true.

“Do you need my help at all?” Serena asked.

“No, I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong so far.”

“It isn’t? Good. Would you like to introduce me to your new friend?”

“Sure. This is Kugi Seijou, a shrine maiden from the Holy Verthalz Empire. I’m told she traveled all the way here to the Wyndas System to look after me.”

Serena was visibly confused.

I didn’t say anything but the truth, but yeah, that’s how anyone would react. Even we haven’t fully absorbed this situation. It’s got to be utterly incomprehensible to a third party.

“I don’t quite understand. Could you put that another way when you repeat it?”

“She’s a shrine maiden from Verthalz. According to her, I’m a big deal, and she’s trained to protect big deals like me.”

Serena’s confusion only intensified.

Don’t look at me like I’m talking nonsense. I can’t explain it well—I don’t understand it either.

“Don’t worry about it too much,” I said. “Basically, thanks to her people’s mission, it’s her job to be with me. We’re traveling together so we can get to know each other.”

“That still doesn’t make sense, but it will do, I suppose. Yet the Holy Verthalz Empire...” Serena crossed her arms and looked at Kugi again. “He may be a mercenary blessed with freedom, but he is also a hero of the Grakkan Empire with a Silver-Winged Sword Assault Badge and the First-Magnitude Star’s Cross of Brilliance. Furthermore, he’s an honorary noble who has earned His Majesty’s respect. If you attempt to drag him away to foreign space, know that it could lead to a diplomatic crisis.”

“I understand. I will only follow my lord, I promise. I would never try to force him to do anything.” Kugi gazed solemnly back at Colonel Serena. Those claims had proven true so far; following me did seem to be her top priority.

“I’ll remember that. Captain Hiro, you said something about being a ‘big deal’ to Verthalz. What specifically has their empire noticed about you?”

“Uh...I guess I have some ridiculous psionic potential they aren’t seeing anywhere else. That’s a factor. But frankly, we still don’t really get it ourselves.”

“I see. More of your usual trouble magnetism. I pity you.”

“You make it sound like that problem’s restricted to me. A whole lot of trouble I’ve had was related to *you*.”

“So, you’ve ordered custom power armor? What’s it like?”

Look at you, smiling and brazenly changing the subject!

“Here it is.” Elma showed Serena the armor design on the table’s holo-display.

“It’s really cool!” Mimi said excitedly.

Seeing the armor, Colonel Serena rolled her eyes. “What a unique design. I suppose it isn’t unlike you at all.”

“Heroic knightly armor wouldn’t suit me, right?”

The armor I’d ordered had a red visor, and since it was designed for environmental adaptability, it covered the wearer head to toe. People from this universe probably wouldn’t get that I’d tried to give it a ninja-like design.

The design process had allowed me to freely mix available external parts. Apart from facial structure and other small details, it was almost the same process as when I’d designed Mei. The shop was going to mold the exterior to match my design, but what really mattered was the power armor itself. If you peeled the exterior off, you’d find a chassis packed with artificial muscles and sensors. That chassis was what really mattered, since you could change the exterior at any point.

“So, Colonel, what brings you here? I mean, I’m guessing it’s power armor.”

“To mark my promotion to colonel, my family sent me an armor chassis. I couldn’t imagine leaving it unused, so I came here to adjust it and attach an exterior. Oh—will you need to record your motion data as well?”

“That was the plan.”

“Isn’t that convenient? Shopkeeper, this merc and I are going to spar. Please record both our data at once. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can. If that’s what you both prefer.”

“There you have it. No need to hold back. Shall we?” Colonel Serena patted her sword hilt.

Wait, we’re not sparring seriously, are we? If you say this is an actual fight, I’m absolutely running away.

In the shop’s basement was a room for taking motion data. There, Colonel Serena and I confronted each other.

“I’ve always been curious about this,” she said. “After all, we’ve fought side by side before.”

“True.”

Serena had taken off only her white jacket. I was dressed in my usual mercenary wear, and we both wielded reinforced resin swords. The room itself was basically a giant motion scanner. It recorded us even while we chose blades, which meant the shop scanned both battle and everyday motions to make its armor as comfortable as possible at all times.

“You don’t seem very excited.”

“Does anyone enjoy pain, really?” I picked a pair of training swords of the perfect length and weight, then turned my gaze to Serena. *Oh, yeah, she’s eager. Is the thought of sticking me with a training sword that exciting?*

“Have some spirit. Your poor attitude will turn victory into defeat.”

“I don’t enjoy trouncing pretty ladies like you, Colonel.”

“...You think you can trounce me?”

“Yeah, that’s what’ll happen.”

“Some nerve. I like it.” Serena grinned.

She is smiling, but it's the smile of a predator. I'm scared as hell.

Serena might've been excited to poke me with a sword, but it wouldn't be that easy. If we did this, I wasn't going to hold back, and I certainly wasn't going to lose. Unless Serena was even stronger than Mei, my victory was certain.

"Now, shall we begin?"

"Sure. Be gent—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Colonel Serena sprang. In a flash, she closed the distance between us and swung her enormous training sword overhead, ready to bring it down on me.

"Whoopsie!" I crossed my two training swords and blocked her blow, using its force to help myself jump backward away from her.

It was dangerous to stand still and fight an enemy who had greater power and speed. If you kept taking hits too strong to parry perfectly, your defenses would end up crushed before you even got a chance to flee.

"You don't intend to fight back?" Colonel Serena glared at me, still holding her sword in its post-swing position.

"I'm a pacifist."

"Good one." The moment she said that, she seemed to flicker—no, charged in at blinding speed. There had been easily ten meters between us, but suddenly, she was right in front of me. *Um, that's obviously not human speed. Augmented nobles are scary.*

Grunting, I held my breath. The world's movements switched into slow motion, and I took a step forward, weaved past Serena's strike by a hair's breadth, and slashed her stomach and calf with my swords. If this were a serious fight, she'd have taken a fatal wound to the stomach, lost her lower right leg, and collapsed.

I leapt forward to put distance between us and spun around. At that point, I saw Serena touch the spot on her stomach that I'd struck. "I see. That's

troublesome.”

“Still forging onward?”

“Of course. I plan to keep you here until you’re convinced.” She grinned ferociously and readied her sword again.

“Ugh.” *Man. Guess I’ve got to deal with her until she tires out.*

“Here I come!” With that same blinding speed, Serena closed the distance between us again.

This time, instead of carelessly charging in, she attacked from a distance. Her previous attacks had been powerful strikes that could break through her prey’s defenses, but this was a rain of lighter slashes. Her swordplay was deft, mixing feints with attacks.

“Oof!”

More strikes meant more openings to take advantage of. Normally, Serena could probably cover those through the sheer quantity of her attacks. Since I could slow time enough to take advantage of the openings, however, her new approach only added opportunities to counterattack.

“Aug! How?!” she screamed.

As I pierced tiny openings in her torrent of strikes, the torrent turned into a drizzle, until at last I was on the offensive. Having to defend herself gave Serena fewer opportunities to attack, disrupting her rhythm and in turn creating more openings.

“Okay, we’re done here.” I thrust my training sword forth and lightly poked her chest. In a real duel, it would’ve been a fatal blow, right to the heart. Not even a noble could survive severe injury to their heart, the center of the circulatory system—though I’d heard some had secondary hearts installed.

Serena fell silent.

Hey, she seems a little...

“One more time! It makes no sense!”

“Whoa! Are you crying?!”

It was kind of cute to see Serena trembling angrily, face reddened, but the terror of her wielding a sword in that state outweighed that. A reinforced resin blade couldn't slice you in half, but if someone swung it at you as hard as they could, it still hurt. I wouldn't give her an inch.

“This is strange, isn't it?!” she cried. “How could I lose a duel to you?! Is some trickery afoot?! Your swordplay isn't even fast!”

I didn't bother answering the questions. If someone accused you of cheating, you couldn't just deny it. “You say that, but the proof's in the pudding.” I wasn't lying; I just wasn't telling the truth.

“It makes no sense! Another round! I demand another round!” She stomped her foot and swung her sword.

What are you, a kid?! “Okay, you want a revenge round? You'll owe me.”

“Grrr...fine! I owe you! Now come at me!”

In the end, after five more rounds, I called it quits. I'd won every single round, but I'd run out of steam.

“It's unsportsmanlike to win and leave! I call this unfair!”

“You expect me to keep doing this?! It's been seven rounds!” I switched my swords to a reverse grip, signaling that I firmly refused to duel further.

Serena was still raring to go, but I was exhausted. Sword-based combat took a lot of concentration, so it was draining mentally—especially since Serena seemed to have figured out my swordplay, which forced me to hold my breath several times. The only other person who could force me to use that ability so frequently was Mei. Of course, I wasn't lying on the ground coughing up blood like when I fought Mei; I'd say Serena was the easier opponent.

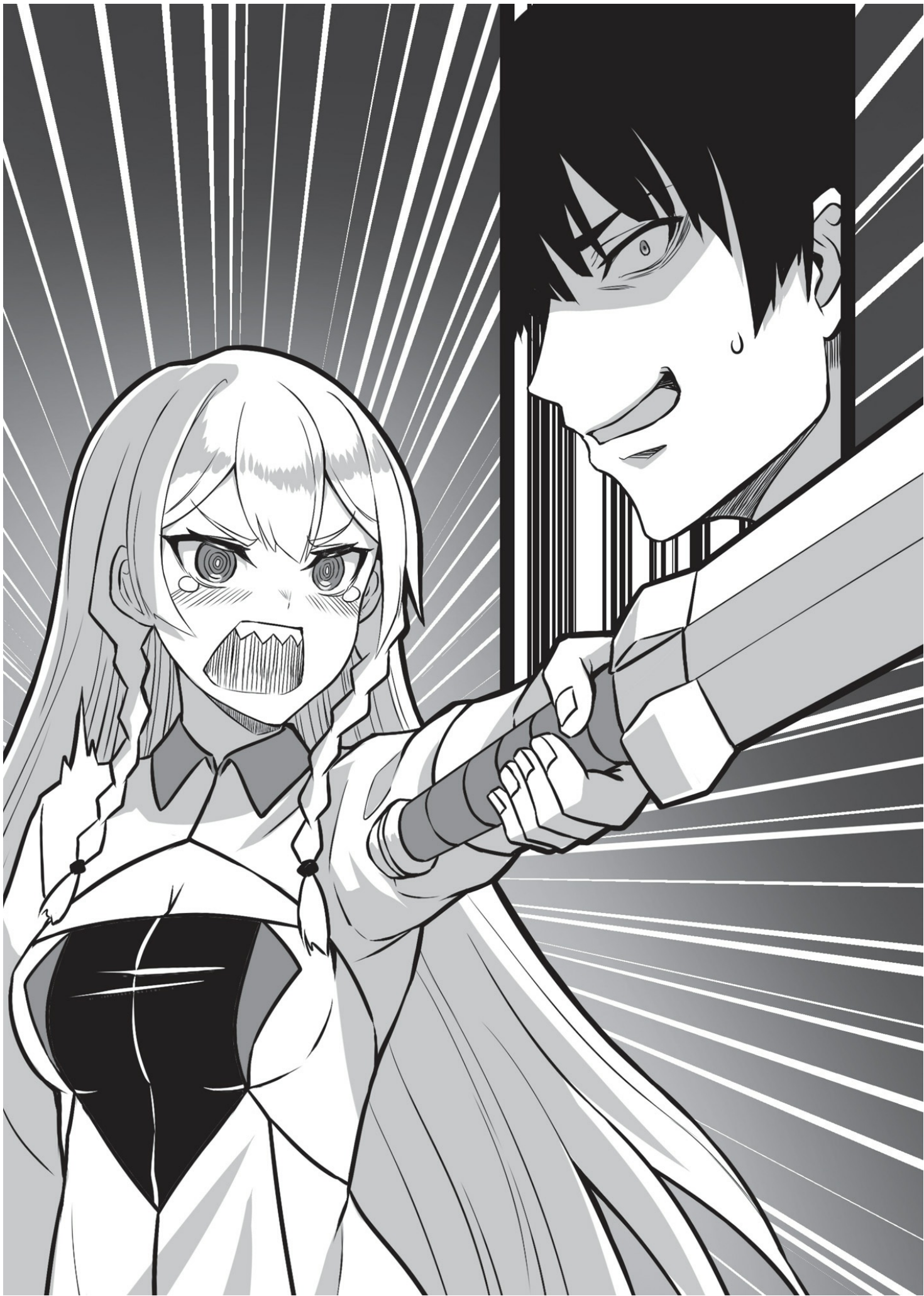
“I've never felt such shame.”

“Shame? We’re just sparring.”

“Nobody’s ever beaten me seven times in a row, sparring or otherwise!”

“Yeah, and...? Is that my fault?”

“Argh! Nobody said anything like that! Nobody at all!” Beet-red, Serena thrust her sword tip at me.



Oh, no, no, no! I'm innocent and defenseless. I'm against violence! I put my training blades under my arms and raised my hands in surrender.

"We've collected more than enough motion data," the shopkeeper finally interjected. "That's enough. Finish up!"

"I swear I'll spar with you again!"

"Okay, yeah, next time."

Serena was quivering in humiliation, but I ignored her glare and walked to the shelving along the wall to deposit my swords. For some reason, it felt like Serena was even more focused on me now. That seemed unavoidable. Was it, though...? Yeah, I'd say so.

I felt like I could sense trouble breathing down my neck again, but surely I was just imagining it. *Surely*. Again...I'd say I was.

As soon as we left the power armor shop, Colonel Serena looked me straight in the eye and declared, "I'm off work today."

"I see. So you're telling me to brace myself?"

"Yes... That's correct." She was surprisingly honest.

Oh—to be clear, this exchange wasn't coming out of nowhere. Once upon a time, Serena had charged aboard the *Krishna* while off work and started a drinking party. She'd wound up ridiculously drunk and made a total fool of herself.

"Where to, girls?" I asked the gang.

"Um...want to get drinks? Anything nonalcoholic is fine with me," said Mimi.

"Yeah. How about we get a meal, rather than drinking?" Elma suggested. "You must be hungry after that workout."

"Now that you mention it, I am." After breakfast at the hotel, I'd called Ernst while the girls shopped. Then we'd met back up, had some quick tea, gone to

the armor shop, and run into Serena, so I hadn't eaten lunch yet. It might still be a little early, but if we searched for a restaurant now, we'd probably get there just in time for lunch. "Sounds like a plan. Fine with you, Colonel?"

"Yes, that's acceptable."

"Okay. Kugi, cool with you?"

"Yes, my lord."

Once they'd agreed, we decided to look for a place to eat. As for Mei, I glanced at her, and she nodded in response. Always the perfect maid, she followed me like a shadow at times like this.

We elected to check out the main street first. As we walked, Mimi took her tablet terminal out of its special hip holster. "Hmm...should we spring for something classy, since Colonel Serena's here?"

Hey, Mimi. It's dangerous to look at your phone...er, tablet...while you're walking.

"Good idea," said Elma. "I wouldn't mind going to a nice place."

"Sounds great, but I'm fine with anywhere, really."

Mimi, Elma, and Serena had known each other for a while, so they discussed our destination casually. Mimi had started off a little reserved around Serena, given the colonel's noble status, but she'd gotten over it around the millionth time she saw Serena plastered and babbling.

"Not weighing in, Kugi?" I asked.

"I don't know anyone else's preferences yet. And, to be honest, I don't even know what foods restaurants serve here."

"Ah—that reminds me. We haven't exchanged terminal addresses. Want to do it now?"

"Oh, all right. Er..." Rummaging through her shoulder bag's small compartments, Kugi took out a small terminal. It looked new and shiny.

“Honestly, I don’t really know how to use it. In Verthalz, we purchase things with bills and coins. We never needed such devices to communicate either.”

“Oh, really? Well, let’s try turning it on... Whoa. You should really enable authentication on this thing.”

“Awe the indication? What’s that?” Kugi cocked her head.

She really doesn’t know what it is. Wow. How does this sci-fi universe have people who can’t use technology? How’d she even get to the Wyndas System? Well, she did say she was aboard a government ship...

“Okay, put it back in your bag for now. I’ll teach you all about it when we’re at the hotel. Make sure no one else gets their hands on it, okay?”

“Yes, my lord.” Kugi obeyed, gingerly placing the small terminal back in her shoulder bag. She’d admitted this herself, but she really was sheltered. Helping her adjust would take time.

Meanwhile, Mei quietly watched our exchange. *Why’s she staring so intently?* I wondered. I turned to look back at her, and she shook her head. *Ah, I see. She’s making sure Kugi doesn’t try any mind control on me.*

“Hiro, come over here. You too, Kugi,” Elma called when we got to the main street. “We narrowed lunch down to a few choices, so help us pick.”

“Roger that. Come on, Kugi, let’s go.”

“All right.”

Kugi and I caught up with the others, who’d walked a few steps ahead while chatting. We gathered next to a dull-looking building to discuss our destination. Hopefully we wouldn’t get in the way of traffic there.

“So, you’ve narrowed it down?”

“Yes! Here’s my recommendation!” Mimi showed me an illustrated menu on her tablet screen. One image showed a mysterious iridescent sphere surrounded by pink noodles—no, some kind of larva or worms. Another showed a skinny creature covered in powder. There was also a four-legged insect boiled

whole. *Crab? Is that crab...? No, something about it is off.* At any rate, all the dishes looked gross to me.

“They serve local cuisine from the planet Pippiperoni!”

“Oookay, gotcha. Next?”

I glanced over and noticed Kugi trembling, her ears flattened and her three fluffy tails bristling a little. It seemed Pippiperoni’s cuisine wasn’t appetizing to her either. I mean, where even *was* that planet? In the Empire? I needed to know so I could stay far away from it.

“I’m leaning toward a safer place,” Elma said, reaching for Mimi’s tablet and calling up a different screen. This one looked like a typical Imperial restaurant. Instead of synthetic cooking from food cartridges, it offered dishes made from real meat and veggies. *Yeah, that’s safe. Very safe.* If I had to nitpick, I’d say it was basically no different from what we could get from the hotel restaurant.

“And the other one is...” I raised an eyebrow. “Huh?”

Finally, Serena had suggested a fast-food chain that had spread all over the Empire. It was run directly by the Empire’s largest automatic cooker manufacturer. It had minimal staff and a variety of automatic cookers, allowing customers to use whichever they liked to order food, then simply take it to their table and eat.

Serena saw my confusion. “Yes?”

“It’s just an unexpected pick.”

“It’s hardly fun to dine at stuffy establishments all the time.”

True enough. It’s not a bad choice, and Kugi’s never had automatic cooker food either. I feel like we only eat at fancy places these days too. “I think I’m on board with the colonel’s proposal,” I decided. “It’s nice having cheap junk food once in a while, right?”

“Yeah, it’s not bad,” Elma agreed.

“That chain had a franchise on Tarmein Prime! I used to go there with a

friend. It's kind of nostalgic..." Mimi looked a little sad. This spot probably brought back both fond memories of happy times, and painful memories of hard times. Tarmein Prime was her homeworld, but it was also the place where she'd been alone, struggling, for so long.

Noticing Mimi's feelings, Elma patted her back to console her. "Don't look so sad. If you don't enjoy the meal, you'll miss out."

"Yeah, you're right! I'm excited to see what they serve these days. Everything but their staple items changes seasonally." Mimi replied cheerfully and smiled. She'd seemingly recovered. In situations like hers, it was best to have fun with friends and replace bad memories with good ones.

"Okay, Kugi, ready to chow down on some junk food? Automatic cookers ain't bad, you know."

"Really? I can't wait." Kugi seemed excited too.

It was time to get going. I was ready to enjoy hot dogs, hamburgers, and other cheap food that I hadn't gotten to eat in a long time.

"How is it?" I asked Kugi.

"Tasty. I'm amazed that machines and 'food cartridges' make all this." Kugi wagged her tails, nibbling a (fake) burger she held in both hands. It had a pure-white bun, vermillion-tinged patty, and deep-green *something* that couldn't possibly be lettuce. It was shaped like a hamburger, but the colors were off. Still, its flavor was fine, so as far as we were concerned it was a hamburger.

As a rule, the color of an automatic cooker's output changed slightly depending on the cartridge. The flavor was usually the same, but the color? Nope. Maybe that was caused by differences in ingredients.

"Master Hiro! Master Hiro! This is delicious, too!"

"Whatcha got? Ooh. Yeah, it's kind of like curry, huh?"

Mimi was eating a yellowish bun full of a spicy paste. That was delicious too,

almost like naan stuffed with curry.

“Urgh.” For some reason, Serena pouted at me as she picked at her dish. Though the food was green, its taste and texture were like french fries.

“Why do you look so unhappy, Colonel?”

“No reason... How lovely that you’re all having such fun.”

“Ugh. Don’t be a pain.”

“Would you please stop name-calling?” Serena smiled dangerously, emitting a dark aura.

“Can you two not argue out here in public?” Elma warned us, exasperated. “We already stand out enough.”

Yeah, okay, we do stand out. What does the average person see? A guy who’s obviously a mercenary, surrounded by four beauties and a Maidroid. One beauty is wearing an Imperial Fleet uniform and actually has a sword on her hip. On closer inspection, even the merc himself has a sword. Is he a noble? Ooh, scary. Stay away from him.

Probably as a result of our appearance, the booths around us were totally empty. *Hunh. Frankly, I feel bad. But I’m not going to, say, miss lunch to make people comfortable. They’ll just have to accept us for now.* It wasn’t like we’d told anyone to move; they were just panicking and running away. I felt it wasn’t worth worrying about.

“How long does your crew plan to stay in this colony?”

I answered Serena’s question between bites of a hot-dog-like item I’d ordered. “We’re stuck for at least another week. We’re awaiting a new ship, and the *Black Lotus* is being worked on. The *Krishna* can fly, but we’re not leaving without the other two ships.” The hot dog wasn’t as chewy as I’d have liked, and the color was weird, but everything else was perfectly fine. “What about you, Serena? What brings you here? Unless there’s some military reason you can’t tell us.”

“Surely you can guess, since I’m a colonel now.”

“Huh?”

She needed to be in the Wyndas System due to her promotion? Did that mean the scale of the Pirate-Hunting Unit she commanded would increase? That’d make sense. The Wyndas System was the biggest shipyard system in all the Empire. It checked out that, if she was here, she was awaiting some new—and maybe not-so-new—ships.

“Sounds busy,” I replied.

“Yes, well... I do appreciate the Empire’s appraisal of my work, but the sheer pace of things has come with its share of stress. And some jealous folks accuse people like me of riding our parents’ coattails.”

“Saying your family connections hadn’t helped would probably be a lie, but I think your flexible thinking and quick judgment are the bigger part. And a bit of luck, too.”

“I can’t refute the luck part.” Serena glanced at me.

It’s true that she could’ve died battling the crystal life-forms if the Black Lotus and I hadn’t shown up with weirdly convenient timing. And she might’ve been badly injured during the land battle in the Kormat System. I doubt she could’ve defeated that monster alone without getting wounded, even with Imperial troops’ support.

“Either way, still strikes me as a lot of work,” I replied. “Will you get way more subordinates?”

“Indeed, quite a number, compared to what I’m used to. Still, I’m from a noble family, so I don’t lack the abilities necessary to lead them.”

“Hell of a lot of confidence.”

Elma spoke up. “As a viscount’s daughter, I’ve obviously had my body augmented. A marquess’s child would have had her mental processing speed augmented on top of that. It’s not just confidence; she genuinely knows that

she can do it.”

“There you have it. Though I prefer not to use those abilities too often, as it’s tiring.” Serena poured a concerning amount of syrupy sweetener into her coffee-like drink.

Do our brains crave sugar for intellectual labor? It was as if they don’t care whether we got diabetes in the process. “Well, from what you’re telling me, it doesn’t sound like you need our help.”

“No,” Elma agreed. “Your fleet’s grown to the point that a couple ships like ours are essentially a rounding error. Your pirate-hunting tactics have improved without us too, right?”

“I suppose. Pirates take the bait much less often lately, so we’re putting more effort into camouflage. We’ve even tried assigning fake escorts that look like the type of ship newbie mercenaries use. Of course, we arm the troops inside with cutting-edge gear.”

“Whoa. That’s downright devious.”

“Small ships a newbie merc might use, packed full of military-grade equipment... Bet that’s a nightmare for pirates who try to take advantage of them.” Elma grinned wryly. The models most likely to be used by newbie mercs were the Space Manta, also known as the Zabuton, and the Spearhead, which people often called the Carrot.

Both were among the smallest of small ships, so they couldn’t carry large generators, and their combat abilities were limited. Still, military-grade equipment would upgrade them into agile, hard-to-hit targets that easily overpowered pirate ships.

Come to think of it, I recalled Serena mentioning that she’d increased the number of bait transport ships in her fleet. When pirates attacked, thinking they’d found a few inexperienced mercs guarding a tasty convoy, they realized that their targets were armed to the teeth—and that was *before* the rest of the force arrived. Scary.

“Devious? Please. You’re the one who taught us those methods.” Serena feigned offense as she elegantly popped a fake chicken nugget into her mouth. It was incredible how she could even look poised while eating fast food with her hands.

See, Elma? That’s real nobility. You’re nothing like that, Elma. Ouch! Stop pinching my arm, Elma.

“Would you please *not* flirt in front of me?” Serena groaned.

“I’m just teaching him a lesson.”

“That really hurt,” I sighed. “Back on topic, if your fleet is growing, that means days of training, right? Have fun with that.”

“That’s true. As we grow in scale, the need to restructure our strategies arises.” Serena looked troubled.

It seemed unlikely that every single recruit to the Pirate-Hunting Unit would be new to the military. Serena would have to overwrite their knowledge of the usual Imperial Fleet procedures with the etiquette of pirate hunting.

Of course, this also meant that she’d have more forces at her disposal, requiring her to devise even more efficient strategies. That was sure to be brain-breaking work. Frankly, the tricks I’d taught her weren’t meant to be used by as many craft as were now at her disposal. Coming up with strategies that used her ballooning fleet’s full potential would be hard.

But did she *need* to, really? Maybe the Imperial Fleet—and Grakkan Empire by extension—really just wanted to use her Pirate-Hunting Unit for PR. Perhaps they’d hunt pirates to maintain peace and curry the public’s favor most of the time, and when it really counted, they’d be thrown into flashy battles to bolster the Empire’s prestige.

They might simply be expected to act as a mobile fighting force the Imperial Fleet could direct wherever it saw fit. If public opinion of the Pirate-Hunting Unit was high, it’d be easier for the military to rely on funding.

“Well, I don’t know whether we can help,” I said, “but we’ll be free once our ship is delivered and the repairs are done. Depending on the contract, I could be willing to take on a job. It’ll be expensive, though, since you’ll be dealing with more ships.”

“Very good. When that time comes, I’ll be happy to contact you. When I do, you’d better not change your mind, since *you’re* the one who offered,” Serena told me.

I shrugged. “Sounds good, if your contract’s agreeable to us.” Saying that left the door open to refuse if I didn’t like the conditions. Better yet, I could make exorbitant demands as an indirect way of declining. *Gah ha ha. I win.*

The day after our meal with the off-duty Colonel Serena, I’d honestly worried that she would immediately demand my help. Surprisingly, though, we were able to spend a peaceful day unbothered.

We ate breakfast, got ready, saw off the twins, and stopped at a gym near the hotel. The hotel itself didn’t have one, so we had to find a place to work out. After all, if we just ate and slept, we’d get out of shape.

“Mercenary work isn’t quite what I expected,” Kugi piped up. “It’s a lot more...”

“Boring?”

“Er, yes. It might be rude to say that to you, though.”

“Nah, not at all.” I shrugged and took a swig of my protein drink. *Hunh. It tastes like kinako. I like that. It’s better than I expected.* “Since we’re waiting on ship maintenance, it’s quieter than usual. This system has almost no space pirates, so the only jobs we could take are escort work. Escort jobs can take weeks or even months. It’d be a bad idea for the *Krishna* to accept one alone.”

“We can’t leave the *Black Lotus* and *Antlion* behind, after all,” Mimi noted.

“So, for the moment, we can’t leave or take jobs. We either train, eat, or

sleep,” I concluded. “It sounds like your image of mercs was similar to most Grakkan Empire residents, huh, Kugi?”

“It likely was. I’ve seen holo-movies, novels, and comics based on mercenary exploits.”

“I’m surprised. The way you talk, it doesn’t sound like people in Verthalz partake of much entertainment.”

“That’s not at all the case. We may prioritize our mission, but it’s important to live a happy and healthy life in pursuit of that. Thus, entertainment is naturally important. It’s as widespread in our empire as anywhere else.” Kugi puffed out her chest.

“I don’t know if I totally get that logic, but I guess it’s not realistic to expect people to throw their lives at a mission and die without ever experiencing joy.” They couldn’t live without relying on certain things, after all. The mission Kugi spoke of was far-reaching, maybe too large in scale for me to understand, but the thought of living solely for something so abstract wasn’t very appealing. “Changing the subject, you have surprising stamina, Kugi. You’re pretty athletic, huh?”

“Am I? I never thought of myself as such.” Kugi cocked her head. The way her ears twitched was cute.

“I thought the same thing. You’re almost as strong as Master Hiro!”

“Well, I don’t know about *that*. I’ve probably got more raw muscle.”

Based on the data displayed on the treadmill, I had better endurance than Kugi, but her other stats were equal to or greater than mine. She couldn’t keep up with Elma’s augmentations, though.

“Does everyone back at home have ears and tails like yours?” I asked, recalling that Kongou and Konoha had animal features. The other shrine maidens did, too.

“Yes, most of us. The shape and number differ, and some have ears like yours

and horns.”

“Oh, really?” *Crazy. Are people in Verthalz like beastfolk? I can only imagine. And what are those horned people like? Oni or something? If they have oni-like people, is Verthalz a land of monsters? Man, that place is full of mysteries.* “If you aren’t especially powerful among your people, maybe your race is stronger than humans like Mimi and me.”

“Do you think so?”

“That might be right,” Mimi agreed. “Tina and Wiska are naturally stronger than humans too.”

They were dwarves, so they had astounding arm muscles and grip strength. And their *livers*? Don’t get me started.

“By the way, what are we doing after we finish up here?” Mimi added. “We didn’t have any plans today, did we?”

“Hmm...no. There’s nowhere left to sightsee,” I grumbled.

Over the past three days, we’d already looked around all Wyndas Tertius’s commercial and entertainment areas. Nothing especially stood out, although the commercial area’s shops had a nice selection of products. Mimi had stocked up on tons of stuff at an imported food market. Sometimes she came across tasty delicacies, but I found most of the imports she bought bizarre at best.

“By the way, they’re delivering some things I ordered to the *Krishna*,” Mimi said.

“Things you ordered?”

“Yep! Foods that trading ships brought in from all kinds of places! Kugi, are you interested in trying some?” Mimi beamed at her.

Oh, no. Kugi, think about what you say. If you let that smile draw you in, you’re in for a world of pain. It’s bait meant to lure you into a hellish dining experience. This is bad. I better change the subject quick. “Oh, hey, Kugi. We were talking about developing my potential before, right? How would you do

that psionic training stuff?”

“Yes, my lord. Hmm... It might be best to train after returning to the hotel. I think you’ll be able to focus more easily if you aren’t subjected to prying stares.”

“I see. In that case, we could head back. Are you two okay with that?”

“I don’t mind,” Elma shrugged. “Mimi, we can check your order out another day.”

“Aww... I guess.” Mimi backed off—if sadly—thanks to Elma. She probably would’ve listened to me too, but it was always hard to tell her “no” outright. And she’d probably have been a lot sadder if I said it. *Hey, Elma, don’t glare at me like that. I appreciate your help.*

Wrapping up our workouts, we washed our sweat off in the gym showers, then returned to the hotel. Once each of us put our bags in our respective rooms, we took a short break.

“You’d usually need to have completed a certain level of classroom training already. But your eye has been opened, and you’ve used your powers...” Kugi’s brow furrowed thoughtfully. It seemed that, from a Verthalz shrine maiden’s perspective, my status was abnormal.

“I doubt I’ll understand many details,” I said, “but a general explanation would actually be nice. Like, what’s with my ability to hold my breath and slow time? Or my weird luck? Why do I get dragged into trouble so easily?”

“I can explain both those things, my lord,” Kugi assured me. “There are three broad directions of magic, or psionic abilities. The first governs power, the second governs the mind, and the third governs space-time.”

“Go on.”

“In my homeland, we call them first magic, second magic, and third magic. The second is seen as stronger than the first, and the third as stronger than the second. The powers you have used are third magic.”

“I get how ‘slowing time down’ falls under space-time, but what about drawing trouble?” If she said that was space-time, too, it wouldn’t make much sense to me. *I mean, wow, I had control of space-time all along? If I develop my abilities, could I stop time entirely?*

“You unconsciously exercise your ability to grasp and manipulate fate, producing a power that pulls tribulations toward you. I’m certain of that. In the past, other Fallen Ones like you were researched exhaustively.”

“Manipulate fate? That’s another curveball. And what was that about exhaustive research?”

“Some terrible things happened during the time of the forced protection policy,” Kugi replied. “As for the ability to manipulate fate, it extends from the power over space-time. It is among the strongest known magic.”

Elma was sprawled lazily on the couch, listening. She chuckled. “Obviously. Manipulating fate is almost unimaginably powerful.” I had to agree.

“The process for exercising this magic is well-defined,” Kugi continued. “By controlling space-time, you can predict the future and forcefully draw said future closer. It is as simple as that, but one must have enormous power to make that happen.”

“How enormous are we talking, exactly?”

“Er...enough power to blow away an entire star system, in many cases. If a large group of people could do the same, it would require the psionic force of everyone in our empire capable of the third magic.”

“Hunh... I’ve been using a ridiculous amount of magic without even knowing it, huh?” Was that a waste of psionic energy? I hadn’t felt it whatsoever. “Okay, I get that I’ve been doing something amazing unconsciously. Trying to understand magic of such a huge scale feels like grasping at clouds, though.”

“An unfortunate aspect of your incredible power, my lord,” Kugi replied. “For now, we ought to discuss something more palpable. Specifically, I would like

you to train in the second magic.”

“That’s power over the mind, right? Telepathy and stuff?”

“Yes, my lord. In my homeland, we call it ‘brainspeak’ or ‘extrasensory transmission,’ but it is commonly called ‘telepathy’ elsewhere. That field of magic includes various abilities. The kinds I’d like you to learn are very basic: extrasensory transmission and the ability to defend yourself from mental attack. I wish to prioritize the latter.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, my lord, if the worst came to pass and someone encroached upon your mental space, the consequences could be catastrophic.”

“Got it.” What would happen if someone used psionic hypnosis or something on me and got their hooks into my crew? No matter what, I’d be heartbroken, and it could lead to the kind of disasters Kugi had mentioned. In other words, a whole star system *could* be destroyed. “Yeah, that settles it. I’m ready to learn, right here and now.”

“Very good, my lord. First, we must sit across from each other.”

“Okay.”

Kugi sat seiza-style on the carpet, so I followed her lead and sat cross-legged across from her. Mimi and Elma sat on either side of me. Mei stood at a distance from Kugi—though, with her speed, she could close that distance instantly.

Kugi glanced at Mimi and Elma with a slightly furrowed brow, but said nothing and focused on me, undaunted. “I’ll begin. Your hands, please.”

“Here you go.” Trusting her, I held both hands out.

“I will attempt a mental attack on you. Oh, but do not worry. This kind of ‘attack’ carries no risk of death or lasting ill effects.”

“I trust you, but why attack me?”

“Please do not misunderstand. A saying in Verthalz is ‘There is no lesson without pain.’ I assume that you see little to no need of this training. After all, such attacks are rare, so you could likely get by without it. Is that what you are thinking?”

“Well... Yeah, kind of.” I understood the risks, but would I ever actually be attacked this way? I couldn’t deny that I was a little skeptical. I probably wouldn’t run into another pro like Kugi.

“Nonetheless, I want you to experience how it would feel if that remote possibility did occur. Please watch carefully, everyone. It bears repeating that this is not dangerous.”

“But it will hurt, right? I’m not into watching Hiro suffer,” Elma protested.

“It’s all right. It will not be painful in a physical sense. But it may be a little embarrassing.” Kugi smiled and faced me head-on.

“Huh? Wai—” Before I could object, Kugi’s golden eyes shone vexingly. *Huh? What’s going on? Why was I trying to tell her to wait?*

“If you have no mental defenses whatsoever, even you will be unable to stop others from securing a direct route into your mind through touch and eye contact. You will have no resistance to close-range magical attacks.”

“Woow. Craazy.” *No idea what’s going on, but it’s all cool.*

“Hey, is he okay?” demanded Elma. “Why does Hiro suddenly sound like an idiot?”

“I-I think that’s going a little too far,” Mimi said. “But he does seem to be...less himself, like his mind’s weaker or something. Are you sure he’s okay?”

“When I release the spell, he will return to normal immediately,” Kugi assured them. “Even if I do not, he will be as he was within five minutes. But as Mimi said, the bounds of my lord’s ego are extremely weak right now. In this state...” She turned to me. “My lord, can you answer my questions?”

“Yeppers. Sure can.” *It feels like people are being mean to me. I gotta answer*

Kugi's questions, though.

"Would you please share a childhood memory of yours?"

"A memory... When I was a kid, this one house in our neighborhood got torn down."

"I see. What happened next?"

"I was playing there, rubble fell on my head, and I got hurt. Mommy said blood spurted out of my head like in a manga."

"Whoa."

Elma's making a weird face. I know that face. She's cringing.

"May I ask a question, Master Hiro?" Mimi asked.

"Yeppers."

"What do you think of me?"

"Er, Mimi, that's..." Kugi protested.

"You're cheerful, earnest, cute, and busty."

"Busty?"

"Busty." *Big boobs are good. And important. So I said it twice.*

"A-anything else?"

"Umm...you're a hard worker, never give up, like stuff that's weird and gross, and you're really cute, so you're wasted on a guy like me."

"That's selling yourself short."

Mimi looks sad. I'm sad when Mimi's sad.

"I didn't hear any negatives in there," Elma said. "Good for you, Mimi. How about me, Hiro?"

"You're...pretty, strong, reliable, and apelike."

"What the hell?!" Elma pinched me hard.

“Owwies!” *That hurts! Stop!*

“Anything else?”

“Um...you act cool and tough, but you’re caring, a romantic, and get lonely easily. Very cute. Also wasted on a guy like me.”

“Hmm...all right, then.” Elma’s ears twitched. It was cute.

“Er...” Kugi looked bothered. “Shall I lift the spell soon?”

“Aw. We want to have more fun.”

“Um, despite the state he’s in, my lord *will* remember everything that happened here. And I think this illustrated my point well enough.”

“Huh? He’ll remember this? That’ll be funny.” Elma smirked.

She makes that face when she’s thinking mean thoughts. I know that.

“Lifting it,” said Kugi. “Done.”

Instantly, my mind awakened. I was confused for an instant, but then I remembered everything I’d said—everything they’d *forced* me to say.

“Nngh...” I groaned.

“Hm?”

“Nyaaaaah!” *What horrifying magic! I mean, it could’ve been worse! It could’ve been much worse, depending what they asked!* Just imagining more risqué questions made me break into a cold sweat.

“It wasn’t bad enough to get this worked up, was it?” Elma said dismissively.

“Have her cast it on you, and see how you feel! It’s seriously terrifying! Do you know how scary it is to be forced to answer someone, whether you want to or not?!”

“Is it...?” Mimi asked.

“If I learn that ability, I’ll totally use it on you girls. You get ready for that.”
Watch out. I’ll interrogate you and dig up truths that never should’ve seen the

light of day, I swear it!

Kugi grinned wryly at my threats. “Er, as your instructor, I’d have to reprimand you for that.”

Too bad. I’m a guy who means what he says. Someday, I’ll do it. And I’ll ask even more pointed questions! “Anyhow,” I told Kugi, “I see the importance of mental defenses. I promise I’m ready to learn.” The trial she’d given me was a harsh one, indeed.

“I’m very happy that you’re motivated, my lord. Now, shall we press on? In the end, practice makes perfect.”

Kugi hypnotized me again. It wasn’t as quick and irresistible as the first time, but I still couldn’t defend myself, amateur that I was.

“What should we ask him next?”

“Hmm...”

I fell under Kugi’s spell again and again, and each time, Mimi and Elma forced me to confess all kinds of terrible things. I couldn’t stand it.

“Isn’t this kind of torture?!” I shrieked.

“There is no lesson without pain, my lord.”

“This isn’t just pain! I feel like my fragile little heart is gonna shatter.”

“Do your utmost, my lord.”

Kugi was surprisingly strict and stoic when it came to training. She didn’t heed my cries whatsoever. In a way, she was worse than Mei, who at least made sure only to pulverize me. *Wait... That’s just as bad. She beats me up and considers it fine as long as I don’t die. Why am I surrounded by people who turn into monsters when they’re teaching? This sucks.*

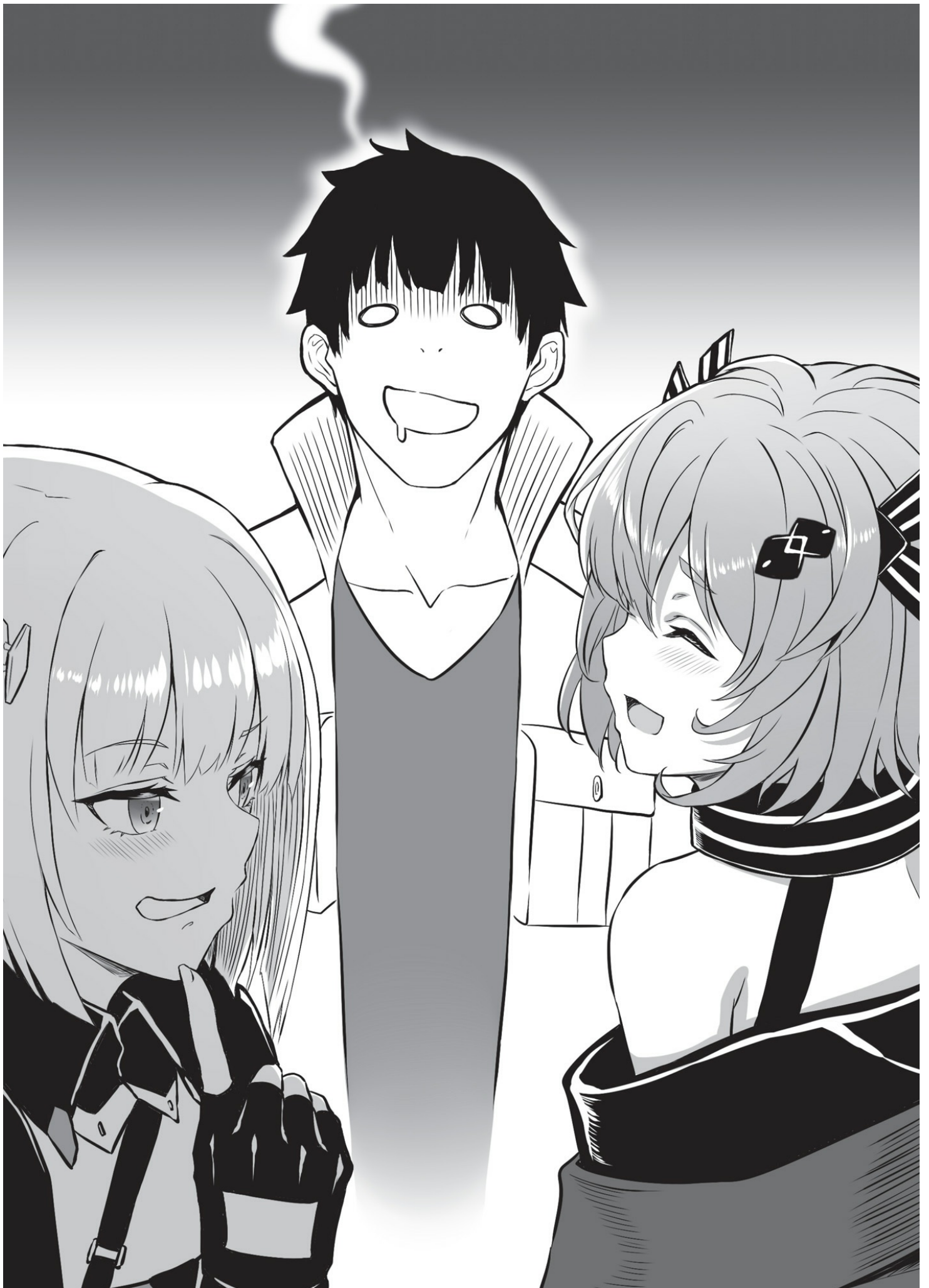
“Nrrrrgh! I feel like I’m getting it! I’m getting it—ack!”

The millionth trance of the day. Whoo.

After lots of arduous training, I finally had enough psionic defenses to earn

Kugi's approval. "Your mental barrier has become formidable, my lord. I could never breach it."

"This was the strongest barrier I could imagine."



Using my mental defenses was kind of like putting a wall or shell around my mind... So to be honest, picturing an A.T. Field *was* helpful. Sorry. Kugi had suggested I envision the shields surrounding the *Krishna* as the barrier, but spacecraft shields tended to get saturated and go down when subjected to enemy fire, so they didn't really work as all-powerful mental defenses. Though, to be fair, A.T. Fields got broken through pretty often too.

"Done already? Well, that was more fun than I expected," Elma chuckled.

"We learned so much!" chirped Mimi.

"Please give me a break..."

Kugi had thankfully stopped them from asking overly nosy questions, but they'd grilled me nevertheless. *Why are you two so interested in digging up my past? Dial it back, okay?*

Maybe it was Kugi's fault for making them focus on the possibility. She'd told them earlier, "Um...I can't stop you from asking him things while he's under the spell's influence. But please try to limit your questions to the distant past. Asking about recent events isn't quite forbidden, but it isn't recommended. It often leads to conflict." I'd have really preferred her to stop them outright, but those words had at least reduced the danger a lot.

"We've now resolved the most pressing issue," Kugi declared. "From here, we can simply add to your repertoire of abilities over time."

"Add to my repertoire, huh? How about we prioritize magic that'd be useful in battle?"

"In battle...? Some of the second magic—which I am strongest in—might prove helpful. However, all those spells are highly advanced and far too dangerous to use lightly. If your potential caused an explosion, the damage could be extensive."

"Oh, like the mass mental poisoning you mentioned. Sounds kind of dangerous."

“Of course it’s dangerous,” Elma interjected. “This would be magic for fights, wouldn’t it?”

Her rebuttal was fair, but I didn’t want my whole crew going down from one blast of psionic friendly fire, then potentially suffering side effects for days. Either way, although we wouldn’t be able to circumvent this problem immediately, I didn’t want my first offensive spell to be too dicey.

“Yeah, but I’d like to start with something a little, you know, soft. Like pushing someone away with an invisible force, or tossing stuff around, or grabbing and throwing enemies as I please. Could we practice something like that?”

“That would be telekinesis, a type of first magic,” Kugi told me. “While I am gifted at the second magic, I struggle with the others. But I will, of course, do my very best to instruct you.”

“Yeah? Okay, then. Please teach me.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said eagerly.

Unfortunately, I wouldn’t learn telekinesis from one day of training. I’d probably have to be patient with this stuff. There was no harm in taking your time, though.

The next day, after saying goodbye to the twins and finishing our morning routine at the gym near the hotel, Kugi and I continued my psionic training. We still didn’t get satisfying results, but Kugi said that imagination and faith were vital, so I kept taking it seriously.

Mimi, Elma, and Mei kept an eye on us while they respectively conducted research, day-drunk, and sat around doing nothing in particular. Of course, although Mei sometimes looked idle, she was often doing network research, communicating with other machine intelligences, remotely accessing the *Black Lotus*, and so on.

As I noticed that it was around lunchtime, my small info terminal rang. I

apologized to Kugi and checked the screen; it was Tina.

What does she need? She and Wiska should be at the Space Dwergr office. Is some trouble afoot? I put her on speaker mode. “Hi, what’s up?”

Tina’s voice came from the other end. “Hey, hon, me and Wiska got a half-day today. We finished everythin’ up in the morning. Wanna grab lunch, just the three of us?”

“Sure. Just me and you two, though?” I glanced at the others. Why had Tina specifically said the *three* of us? It was the first time she’d done that.

Elma looked at me. “Mei and I can take care of things. Go have fun.”

Mimi nodded too.

Hmm? Is it me, or does this reek of planning? “What the hell are you plotting...? Oh, never mind. Where should I meet you, Tina?”

“Uh, I’ll send you location data. We’ll head there lickety-split. Thanks!”

“Got it. See you there.”

After we hung up, Tina quickly sent map data for the restaurant.

Hmm? Looks classy. “I guess I shouldn’t ask what’s going on.”

“Go hear it from the horses’ mouths,” Elma said.

“Okay... Sorry, Kugi, but training will have to wait for another day.”

“Yes, my lord. No problem at all.” Kugi smiled, unbothered by the interruption. She really was a good, wholesome girl. It almost made me feel bad.

“We’ll just hang out here,” said Elma. “But you owe us, okay?”

“Give me a break,” I chuckled. “Serena’s bad enough already.”

I glanced over at Mei, who was standing by in the corner of the room. She nodded back.

All right. What’re the twins going to bring up at lunch?

I took the tram to the meeting spot, where Tina and Wiska were already waiting. I wasn't surprised to see them both; they'd probably traveled together after work.

"Hon! Over here!"

"You're a little dressed up, huh?"

They wore fashionable casual wear instead of their usual coveralls, although they'd left the hotel that morning in normal work clothes. Come to think of it, they'd carried more bags than usual. Had they brought a change of clothes? My suspicion that this had been planned was getting stronger and stronger.

"Heh heh! I admit, I usually just let ya see my hick side. So? Head over heels yet? Go on, you can say I'm cute."

"Yeah, you're cute. Striking, even. It's a refreshing little change of pace." I meant it. Tina was wearing a fitted outfit that emphasized her legs, so the word "stylish" fit more than "cute." She was as short as ever, but the outfit added sex appeal, showing off her abs.

Unlike Tina, Wiska had dressed in a way that emphasized femininity. She wore a dress with blue stripes that matched her hair, topping it off with a white hat. The difference between the twins was kind of incredible.

"Wiska, you seem tense. Everything okay?"

"Uh...let's talk about that while we eat, 'kay?" Tina headed into the restaurant.

It was no use standing around, so I took the nervous Wiska's hand and followed her sister into the joint. "What's the matter?"

"S-sorry... I'm fine."

She definitely didn't look fine, but if she didn't want to talk, I had no reason to push. Her little hands were clammy, making it clear that she was *really* nervous. Imagining what conversation she'd be this anxious about infected me with

worry, too.

When we went inside, Tina was already asking a server to seat us. It seemed she had a reservation.

“Please follow me,” said the server.

“Thanks. Get over here, hon.”

“Gotcha. Wiska, can you walk?”

“I’m okay... I’m okay...”

You really don’t look okay. Tina and Wiska were both jittery, but they didn’t seem *sad*. It couldn’t possibly be that bad. As I wondered what was going on, the server guided us to a remote booth in the back. Partitions hid it from other customers, balancing freedom and privacy.

“This restaurant’s pretty swanky.”

“Sure is. It’s just dim enough to set the mood too.”

It wasn’t dark, but the dim indirect lighting was relaxing. Maybe the slow music playing at a perfect volume kept it from seeming gloomy, despite the darkness.

“Drinks first?” I asked. “I’ll take something nonalcoholic.”

“Think we’ll do the same for now. If we don’t take care of business pronto, Wiska’s gonna lose it.”

Tina grinned pointedly and tapped the ordering tablet. I had to agree; given the state she was in, Wiska probably wouldn’t taste her meal. By this point, I was on tenterhooks about what was going on. It had to be serious if they wanted to discuss it perfectly sober.

“Y’all went to the gym this mornin’, right? Anythin’ seem off?”

“Nah. It was really the same as usual. I trained with Kugi, but as far as I can tell, I still can’t use any psionic superpowers. Oh, did I mention? Kugi’s small, but she’s really tough. She could almost hold her own against me.”

“Wow. Can’t judge a book by its cover, huh? You’d never expect that from a stick like her.”

“We talked about whether it might be a species thing. Like how you two are way stronger than you look.”

“Compared to you humans, yeah. To us, y’all are weaker than ya look.”

The server appeared with a tray of drinks that resembled wine, but were more similar to grape juice. Juice made from real fruit was a luxury on colonies like this one.

“So, what brings us here today?” I finally asked. “It seems like you planned this in advance.”

“Uh, yeah, er... Y’know. Right, Wis?”

“Eep! Um, uh, well...” Wiska got so flustered that I felt bad for her. It seemed like it’d take a while to get them to be straightforward.

“Okay, okay. At least tell me whether it’s good or bad news.”

“Depends on you, hon.”

“It depends on me?”

This was so weird. It was apparently important enough to set aside a time and place to discuss this. It flustered them, but they’d dressed up for the occasion... and whether it was good news depended on *me*? An electric current ran through my mind. *It isn’t that, right?*

“No way. Did I knock you both up at the same time?”

“Knock us up?” They both cocked their heads, confused.

Oh, is that not slang here? “I mean, you’re pulling out all the stops. I was wondering if you were pregnant. That’d be good news—”

“Pr-pregnant?” Tina blushed madly. “Wis and me both use birth control, y’know. Though I’m glad ya think that’d be good.”

Oh, okay. Right. The girls share info and stuff about that, after all. I’d

considered taking measures on my end out of concern for the burden that might put on their bodies, but apparently it was easier for them to figure out as a group.

“Then what is it? I really have no idea.”

I couldn't think of any other reasons for such a tense, formal conversation. The twins had their noses to the grindstone at Space Dwergr's Wyndas Tertius branch lately, so I couldn't imagine a sudden change or life-altering event had happened. *Oh—maybe the company ordered them to come back and work there permanently again. I wouldn't like that. But if that was it, they'd just call it bad news, right? So it can't be.*

“Sorry, nope, no idea. I give up. Can you just tell me now?”

“Um, well... We've been thinkin' about leavin' our company.”

“Whoa.” *So that's it.* “In other words, you don't want to be on loan from Space Dwergr? You want to be formal crew members?”

“Y-yes,” Wiska stammered. “But, um, only if you want us to sign on.”

“Of course I do. I'd love it. Hell, I was looking for the right time to suggest it myself.”

“Huh? For real?”

“Yeah. I've been wondering when would be a good time to bring it up.” That was the truth. It was just that our current situation hadn't yet inconvenienced us, and the twins didn't seem bothered by it, so I'd put off the discussion. “If your bosses had ordered you to leave the *Black Lotus* or something, I would've suggested you quit and come with us. I didn't think you'd bring it up yourselves while I was waiting for the right time.”

“That so? Man...” Tina heaved a deep, relieved sigh.

Wiska slumped weakly as well. “We were nervous because we didn't know what we'd do if you refused. Sis and I have been talking about it for a few days now.”

“We decided last night. Today, we told Space Dwergr we’re plannin’ to quit.”

“Little bold to tell them that before confirming your roles with the employer you’re trying to move to, right? Not that I’d ever refuse.”

It felt like they’d gone about things in the wrong order, but maybe they’d already discussed this with Mimi, Elma, and Mei. If so, they could be confident that I’d bring them on—though, in that case, there was no need for them to be so nervous.

“You okay, Wiska?”

“I’m not.” Wiska was face down on the table, probably because she’d fully released that tension she’d built up. “This’s such a relief, it just sapped all my energy out of me.”

It seemed to me like they’d gotten rattled about this for nothing. It wasn’t that big a deal in the end; they asked, I agreed, and that was that.

“Phew... Well, that’s that. How ’bout a toast?”

“Sure. What do we toast to?”

“Our bright future!” Tina said, raising her glass.

Bright future, huh? I like that. I better do my best to make that future a reality.

Chapter 7:

Power Beyond the Pale

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since I'd decided that Tina and Wiska would become full crew members.

Huh? What happened after that discussion? Well, the twins and I ate lunch. Since we were celebrating, they made me drink some booze. Before I knew it, the three of us ended up "resting" at a spot near the restaurant. To be fair, part of me knew what they were leading up to and went with it. I taught them a lesson anyway, though; they needed punishment for being so bad.

After breakfast and some quick morning prep, I asked the group, "What's the plan for the day?"

Mei spoke up. "Master, the armor shop sent word that your order is complete."

"We'll pick that up today, then!" Mimi said with an excited smile.

I'd spent the past few days on dates with Elma, Mei, and Mimi, in that order. Yesterday, Mimi and I had gone out to eat, strolled around together, checked out a virtual aquarium, and finished up by having some fun together back at the hotel. This morning, she was in an especially good mood.

"Today's Kugi's turn, huh?" Tina said.

"Me?" Kugi's ears perked up in surprise.

"Well, yeah! He's goin' out with us one by one."

"You have to be fair when it comes to stuff like this, even though you ended up last this time," Elma agreed.

Mei's emotionlessness made it hard to figure out what she was thinking, but she'd have said something if she objected; no response was surely approval. Wiska and Mimi nodded too, so nobody had an issue with my going out with

Kugi.

“Understood. Then I shall serve you today, my lord.”

“Sure. Looking forward to it.” I glanced at Elma, who nodded back. Then I looked at Mei, who did likewise.

It seemed that, after the past few days of living with Kugi, they’d judged that she wasn’t up to anything. Part of me felt like they decided that too quickly, but they probably had a strategy. For now, I just had to watch myself and stay out of trouble.

After getting properly dressed—well, putting on a jacket and equipping my laser gun and swords—I left the hotel with Kugi.

“Let’s go to the armor shop first and pick up my power armor.”

“Yes, my lord. But do you not need Lady Mei’s help?”

“Help with what?”

“Such armor must be heavy. Will carrying it home not be troublesome?” Kugi looked worried.

Oh, that’s her concern. I get it. “Colonies are designed with cargo transport systems, so we won’t need to carry a heavy package ourselves. Know how we ride around the colony on the tram? Shops have a smaller version so they can send products directly to and from warehouses.”

“I see. But then, why—oh! I understand. You must try the armor on before accepting it, yes?”

“Right. But they have my size and motion data, so I doubt I’ll put it on and hate it.”

As Kugi and I talked, we arrived at the tram station and boarded. This colony had a strong transit network, so although you had to walk around a lot, it wasn’t really inconvenient at all. You used the tram for longer-distance travel,

walking to and from the station. Personal vehicles weren't common. Only emergency medical services, mercenaries, and the fire department seemed to use them.

The tram was really crowded. Kugi and I had to huddle together, so close that my breath touched her ears.

"M-my lord, that tickles!"

"Huh? Oh, sorry."

No wonder her ears were twitching and flapping bizarrely. But I mean, it was just an unfortunate accident. It wasn't like I was panting; I was breathing normally. Kugi *was* breathing heavily, though. We'd had to squeeze so closely together that her cheek unavoidably pressed right against my chest.

Everyone had showered after our morning workout, but I worried that I might smell sweaty. *Could you not sniff me like that? Don't blush and get fidgety, either. Between that and your softness pressing against me, my body's going to react in a predictable way.*

Despite that issue, we got through our tram ride, calmed down, and resumed walking to the power-armor shop.

"Have you gotten used to the crew's daily life yet?" I asked.

"Yes. Everyone's so kind to me, I wish there were some way I could repay them."

"Really? Well, the ship ought to be finished in a few days, so things are going to change a little. You'll need to adjust to our real daily routine."

"Of course. I'd like to do my best to earn everyone's trust as soon as I can."

I chuckled inwardly at Kugi's earnestness. She knew that we didn't quite trust her fully yet. She really was perceptive. "Well, uh, sorry we're still leery."

"No, it's common for people from other nations not to fully understand our mission. Especially given our mastery of magic."

“Your magic does seem as dangerous as laser guns and power armor-slicing monoswords.”

Kugi smiled and looked up at me. “I’m in good spirits, my lord. Thank you. I just need to endeavor to earn everyone’s trust.”

“Okay. But come to me if things feel rough, okay? If I can do anything to make you feel better, even just give you a hug, I will.”

“In that case, perhaps after we collect the armor—” Kugi stopped mid-sentence, fox ears perked.

“What’s wrong? Huh...?” It was faint, but I felt something strange. *What is that? It’s like I’m confused... Fear? Panic? I don’t know, but negative emotions are washing over me. What the hell?* “What’s going on, Kugi?”

“I too am unsure. It’s too awkward and primitive to be telepathy. How disturbing...” Kugi paused. She sniffed the air, furrowing her brow in displeasure. “My lord, I smell blood.”

“That’s no good. Let’s hurry to the armor shop.”

We’re not far from there. Is this more trouble? Give me a break...

I ran into the armor shop with Kugi, ready and waiting to whip out my swords or laser gun.

Naturally, the shopkeeper wasn’t happy with that. “Welcome... Is something wrong?”

After another sniff, Kugi whispered to me, “It isn’t in this building, my lord.”

“No?” I turned to the shopkeeper. “Oh, uh... It’s nothing, sir. Well, not *nothing*. This girl smelled blood outside. We were worried something bad might be happening in here.”

“Blood, you say? That’s alarming. This area’s security should be top-notch. I’ll file a report just in case. An odd smell could be a concern even if it isn’t blood.”

“Got to agree with you there.”

Needless to say, colonies were hermetically sealed. Contaminants like poison gas or contagious disease could easily destroy an entire colony, so it was out of the question that something that caused bad smells and disease—a corpse, for instance—would be left out. Of course, the colony was atmospherically controlled, and any abnormality quickly triggered the dispatch of security and decontamination teams. The fact that Kugi smelled blood at all meant something was already very wrong.

The shopkeeper quickly used his countertop holo-display to call colony security. “Yes. Yes, that’s correct. A customer says she smells something like blood nearby. Yes, that’s all, thank you.”

From that call, I gathered security and decontamination teams would show up before long. I doubted they’d rush over based on one report, but they’d probably likewise detected something wrong in their air-monitoring data. Or maybe their cameras had revealed something amiss.

“There’s nothing left for us to do about it,” the shopkeeper declared. “Shall we discuss your armor?”

“Now, *you’re* a businessman,” I joked.

“I appreciate the compliment. Everything’s ready. Please come right this way.” He beckoned us to the back of the shop.

I glanced at Kugi once more. She was frowning, her ears twitching like mad.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“I can’t say for certain. The smell isn’t getting closer, but we aren’t moving farther from it either.”

“At times like this, we usually end up involved whether we like it or not.” I still had a vague sense of discomfort, as if I were getting goosebumps. The unwanted unease made my skin crawl. I felt bad for the startled shopkeeper, but my alarm bells were ringing. “Stay vigilant. Let me know immediately if it

gets nearer.”

“Yes. I will be alert,” Kugi said with utmost sincerity.

Man, I hope I don't get wrapped up in this... Not that there's any point hoping. Any point at all. It's obvious from experience that this'll involve me, whatever I do to avoid it.

“Here it is. I'd say it turned out exactly as you requested. What do you think?”

“Oh—very nice. Just what I wanted.”

In the room the shopkeeper ushered us into—the room where Serena and I had dueled to record our motion data—was the lightweight power armor I'd ordered. It was sleek and agile-looking, about two size options down from the Rikishi, and mostly black, which gave the design a ninja-like touch.

The armor was in a low-power state, so its visor was dark, but I'd ordered one that would glow red when activated. Of course, the armor was designed for stealth too, so the visor light could be turned off. The armor itself could be any color I needed, since its plating had a chameleon function.

The plating was thinner than the Rikishi's, but the suit still had better defensive abilities and environmental adaptability than commercial combat armor. While its firepower was low due to its lack of fixed armaments, the power armor could equip heavy firearms if needed, as well as use normal infantry weapons. I could wield a sword while wearing the armor, so its offensive power wouldn't really be inferior to the Rikishi's. The new suit also had a power-assist feature that would increase my melee combat abilities.

“Kugi, hold my swords and gun for me.”

“Yes, my lord.”

I took off my sword and gun belt and handed it to her. Then, jacket still on, I got behind the freestanding power armor. It authenticated me via biometrics and opened for me. I stepped in. As I entered, the power armor immediately switched on and displayed the outside world. *Nope, nothing wrong with it yet.*

Its motions already feel more agile than the Rikishi's. It's like I'm wearing nothing at all.

"It's comfy."

"This suit was made to fit you perfectly, after all. Since its feedback system uses your motion data, it should be even more comfortable than going unarmored."

"Wow... This is really something. Kugi, can I have my swords and gun?"

"Yes, my lord."

I attached the swords to my hip, shoulder, and back hardpoints, unsheathing and sheathing them from each angle to compare how it felt. *Yeah, nice.* As I tried to draw the swords, the hardpoints moved automatically to smooth the motion.

"Since I plan to use optical camouflage, the shoulder hardpoints are the best option, huh?" I could also attach my laser gun to either upper thigh.

"Indeed. So long as you don't plan to attach heavy weapons, I believe the shoulder hardpoints will be ideal."

Those were positioned on my shoulder blades, but when I wanted to whip out my swords, the hardpoint extensions moved the hilts to more accessible positions. Convenient indeed.

As I assessed my armor, Kugi's ears perked up. "My lord, that smell..."

"Oh, right... Well, I didn't think we'd get away that easily. This might even be kind of convenient." I'd just finished checking my new armor's basic operations, so these were now basically ideal circumstances.

Overhearing our exchange, the shopkeeper cocked his head. "In what way? That sounds rather dire..."

"Let me just say this up front: it's not my fault."

As soon as I told him that, the corner of the room was knocked in. Something

charged inside, sending rubble flying. The concrete-like walls had shattered so spectacularly that they produced a dusty smokescreen, making it difficult to see what'd just entered.

"Wh-what the...?!"

"Talk about a dramatic entrance," I muttered as I drew my two swords. "Are your walls that fragile?"

"Of course not! This shop wasn't slapped together!" the shopkeeper insisted loudly.

The smokescreen finally started to clear—and something black lunged at me.

"Whoa!"

My first impression was of a swarm of black swords. I promptly held my breath. In the slowed flow of time, I sidestepped, batting away blades I couldn't fully evade. *What the hell? I can cut through them, but damn, they're tough!*

"My lord!"



“I’m fine! Stay back!”

The owner of the blades—no, *legs*—screached as black liquid oozed from where I’d cut it. The creature was spider-shaped and shone like black metal.

“A combat bot...? No. What the hell is this?!”

It did resemble a spider-shaped close-quarters battle robot at first glance, but I could feel its mental activity. In fact, that had to be the source of the emotional waves that had been rattling me for a while now. Even now, waves of ugly, primitive anguish emanated from the spider.

“Damn!”

Despite the loss of two legs, the thing ran at me, racked with fear. Cutting down a foe that was terrified of me hurt my heart, but I had no way to communicate with it. Protecting myself and my allies was my only option.

I repelled the four remaining bladed legs, my monoswords lopping them off one by one. It felt like striking heavy steel, but the sword tips didn’t bend or break; they did their jobs perfectly.

⟨*Greeee... Greeee...*⟩

More black ooze flowed from the culled legs. The spider couldn’t move easily on its two remaining hind limbs; it could only struggle as its own sludge-like blood covered it. It was pitiful to watch its two remaining legs claw at the ground for steady footing.

“Hup...hup...whoop!” I quickly but cautiously approached the black spider and swung my swords, cutting off its final two limbs, as well as the bases of the other four legs, which I hadn’t quite severed.

⟨*Greeeeeeee!*⟩ the black metal spider screamed, though I didn’t know from what orifice.

“Argh! Shut up!”

Hm? Think I was merciless? Well, mercy would’ve been recklessness—if I’d

dropped my guard, I might've gotten Kugi badly hurt or worse. I felt bad, but I had to do what I had to do. I had no mercy for active threats.

"Have you neutralized it...?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Now that all its legs are gone, it can't possibly move. It might fire a deadly laser or something, though."

"I'd appreciate if you hurried and finished it off." The shopkeeper's demand was fair, but could my swords cut through the spider's thick, gleaming torso? Even its spindly legs had been sturdy as hell. There was only one way to find out.

As I raised my sword, the spider screeched. *«Kreeee!»*

The yelp wasn't audible. Rather, it consisted of powerful emotion that shot through my power armor plating—and perhaps through the entire colony. Judging by how Kugi and the shopkeeper both tensed up, it was strong enough telepathy that even people without psionic powers could hear it, like when I'd broken the Singing Crystal or destroyed the Mother Crystal.

Wait. Does that mean crystal life-forms have psionic powers? Well, that'd make sense. There's no way those weird things are normal monsters.

"Wh-what was that...?"

"Its dying cry. This should be the end. Huh...?" *What's that? It's getting closer.* "I don't know what's going on, but this might not have been the end, actually. You two should get to safety."

"I will join you, my lord!" Kugi said, determined.

I shook my head. "No. If a few of those things arrive, I might not be able to protect you. Sir, can you take care of her for me?"

"O-of course. We should be safe in the workshop—its walls are made to withstand explosions."

"Thanks. If you can, call Mei—my Maidroid—and explain what's going on."

Mei had told me that my power armor was finished, and as I recalled, I'd set her as my contact for the shop. The shopkeeper should be able to call her without any problems.

Meanwhile, the rumbling came ever closer. I didn't know what the sound was, but my acute senses could tell it was approaching. Had that "dying cry" actually been the monster calling for help?

"Go!" I yelled. At the same time, three more black orbs flew in through the huge hole in the wall.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Three? You expect me to survive against three of these things?!

The black orbs were obviously more black metal spiders. Seeing them unfold was crazy, but I couldn't exactly waste time gawking when the spiders were gearing up to attack me simultaneously.

"Whoa!"

I dodged the first spider's pounce, then used the mobility of my made-to-order lightweight power armor—sorry, I'll just call it my "ninja armor" for short—to leap above the second, fire my left-arm grappling hook into the wall, and fly over the third spider as it tried to guess my landing point.

⟨Greeeeeeee!⟩

Why did horrific monsters attack every single time I put on power armor? Was some GM watching and being like "Oh, he's got power armor on? Great, let's do this!" then throwing all the trouble they could at me? If so, I'd love to throw a comebacker at them.

"No security team yet, huh...?"

Whether the security team could help when they did arrive was dubious, since laser guns didn't seem to work on these things. Even I figured that fighting all three spiders at close range was too risky, so I'd tried using mobility to keep

my distance, then whittling them down with lasers. Laser guns didn't seem to damage those black carapaces, though, no matter what I did.

This universe's laser guns vaporized a target's surface, causing explosions; they didn't fire rays that pierced through anything. When I shot at the spiders, those explosions just didn't happen. In other words, the lasers couldn't vaporize their surface material. If lasers at lethal power didn't work, I wasn't sure plasma weapons would be any better. What the hell was their armor made of?

"Well, now, what do I do about this?"

I freed the grappling hook, landed, and faced the three spiders, which had likewise turned to face me. There weren't any people around, probably because the colony set off warning alarms and evacuated locals into shelters. If this kept going too long, though, the spiders might move to districts that hadn't evacuated yet.

If I kept buying time, Mei or the colony's security team would definitely come running. If the security team couldn't stop the spiders, Imperial Fleet marines would surely follow them. Maybe wheel-spinning until then would be more effective than forcing myself to take all three spiders down.

"Hey! Over here, you six-legged bastards!"

I fired my laser gun repeatedly to attract their attention, hoping to keep them from attacking random walls and finding delicious people to eat. After this, I'd just have to take them for a leisurely walk around town.

"You seem to be struggling, Fallen One."

"Huh?"

A figure holding a katana had landed softly between me and the spiders. She had dark-brown hair, round ears atop her head, and a leaf-patterned kimono. It was none other than Konoha, the guard I'd met at Verthalz's temple recently.

"Hey! It's dangerous here!"

"Is it? This is a type of enemy I've yet to see," Konoha murmured,

approaching the metal spiders. “Hmm. How odd. I believed them to be machines, but it seems they live.” She showed no wariness whatsoever.

Naturally, the spiders switched their targeting priority to Konoha. They crouched, preparing for a unified pounce.

“Damn it!” I holstered my laser gun in the power armor’s mount and darted toward the woman, my left hand now free. *This is bad. Even if I hold my breath, I might not make it in time!*

Konoha waved dismissively back at me. Before I understood what that meant, the metal spiders rushed her. She brought the same hand forward, causing them to suddenly stop—in midair. If that doesn’t make sense to you, welcome to the club. “Huh...?”

The spiders seemed to panic, thrashing their bladed legs violently in search of footing, but there was no footing for them to find.

“These aren’t even a threat,” Konoha said flatly.

“O-okay... But stopping them from moving won’t do anything, right?”

“I don’t relish taking life, but they don’t seem ready to surrender, and there’s no way to communicate with them. I suppose I have no choice.” Konoha sighed, turned her palm upward, and clenched her fist. When she did, the three spiders collided violently in midair. With a grinding metallic sound, they began crushing against each other. Black sludge erupted like a volcano, covering the floor and surrounding buildings.

“Fragile beings.”

“Yikes. Is that psionics? The first magic, or whatever?”

“Ah, correct. You must have learned from Kugi. That is the power of my specialty, telekinesis.”

“Could I do that if I trained enough?”

“Fallen Ones are said to have the makings of great spellcasters, so depending on your training, surpassing me—” Konoha stopped herself. One round ear

twitched. At the same time, my ninja armor picked up the low rumble of something approaching. “They’re coming.”

“Seems like it.”

“This is a good opportunity for you to watch and learn, Fallen One. Behold the power of the Holy Empire’s proud guards.”

Five obsidian orbs appeared on the road where we stood. That rumbling must’ve been the sound of the metal spiders rolling in orb mode.

“I can take two off your hands,” I told Konoha.

“Unnecessary. Now...”

Bang! She shot forth something that resembled a cannonball.

What the hell was that? She’s even faster than my ninja armor—way faster! She isn’t wearing power armor, is she?

Konoha flipped in midair and swung her katana at the morphing spiders from above. “Haaah!”

Her blade didn’t make contact, yet it cut the center three spiders to ribbons. They spewed black ooze and died without even getting to let out dying cries.

“Uh...” *I’m confused.*

I’d struggled to cut through those things with monoswords, but Konoha was slicing them apart like tofu. What the hell was happening? Why not just let her do all the work?

Konoha landed on the ground astoundingly lightly. *What about all the momentum from your speed? I know it’s silly for me, of all people, to complain about this, but can’t you follow basic physics? The law of conservation of momentum?*

“Take this!”

Konoha flailed her left arm, causing one of the two remaining spiders to fly around as if swung by an invisible hand. It slammed into the other surviving

spider again and again. *Clunshk! Clunshk!* After several unbelievable sounds, the two finally shattered into black stains on the ground.

Konoha returned to me with a smug look on her face. “That should be the end of them. See? Easy, wasn’t it?”

I waved my hands wildly. “That string of words makes no sense at all!”

She’d called this an opportunity to watch and learn, but damn, she was a bad teacher. I hadn’t learned anything! She was so ridiculously strong, she’d put Darth V***r to shame! I’d thought Mei could fold Konoha in half, but I didn’t even know anymore. *Could* someone fight her without a full-fledged spaceship?

“Are there a lot of people like you in Verthalz?”

“I am ill-equipped to answer that. However, you must bear in mind that I am a guard protecting a temple built in a foreign realm. Among my people, I pride myself on being nearer to the strongest fighters than the weakest.”

“Oh. Got it.”

That meant at least dozens to *hundreds* of people were stronger than her. If Verthalz had at least a hundred one-person armies with comparable skills, it might just be a lot more dangerous than I’d thought.

And “Fallen Ones” like me could supposedly deal huge damage to a country with tons of people of her strength? Hell, we really are like Super Saiyans. Actually. I’d really rather be a normal human, thanks.

While I groused inwardly, sheathing my swords, my ninja armor’s sensors picked up what sounded like sirens from afar. It seemed the colony’s security was finally coming running.

“Looks like the cavalry’s arriving a little too late,” I remarked. “Why were you wandering around a place like this anyway?”

“How rude. Kugi called for my aid, so I came.” Konoha tapped her temple with her fingertip. “She loves you, you know.”

That explains it. Kugi used telepathy to call reinforcements. But the temple’s

pretty far from here... Well, I guess distance doesn't matter if you can fly around like a cannonball.

"I'd better thank Kugi later. And you, too."

"I care not for your thanks, but be sure that you thank her. How is she adapting to her new life? I am concerned for her. Shrine maidens are typically sheltered, and know little of the world."

"You, of all people, would say that?"

Konoha glared up through my visor into my eyes, a sullen look on her face.

"What do you mean by that?"

Well, you're calling her sheltered? I don't think you're much less naive. "She's okay. I think she's been getting used to things so far. I won't say she's won our total trust, but that kind of stuff takes time."



“That will do. Hmm...?” Konoha’s round ears twitched again.

What now? I worried.

Just then, something appeared from around a corner, charging toward us with ferocious speed. Something *black*. No, it wasn’t just something—it was —“Master!”

“Oh, Mei! Thanks for rushing here on such short notice.”

Having run a hundred meters in mere seconds, Mei suddenly stopped right in front of me, kicking up wind and dust. My power armor shielded me, so I was fine, but the unarmored Konoha had a stony expression as the gusts and dirt buffeted her. I was surprised that she wasn’t psionically defending herself at a time like this. Did some policy limit how people in Verthalz used those powers?

“Are you unhurt?” Konoha asked me.

“Oh, yeah. I’m perfectly fine. See?” My ninja armor had no scratches, so naturally, I was uninjured. The armor read my vital information as well, which allowed Mei to access it and confirm for herself that I was okay. “The shopkeeper called you, right?”

“Yes, Master. Unfortunately, it seems I was too late.” Mei glanced at Konoha, who smirked proudly in response.

Is that look meant as a provocation? I doubt Mei would fall for that easily, but still, please back off. If you two fight, this colony might end up a pile of rubble in no time.

“Who are you people?”

The four of us—Mei, Konoha, me, and Kugi, who’d run to us from the armor shop after Konoha contacted her telepathically—were being interrogated on the spot by some rather heavily armed troops.

It figured, though. If a report was made and they ran into town, then found a

guy in battle-ready power armor, a Maidroid, and a suspicious woman with an unusual sword who clearly *wasn't* Grakkan nobility, they'd have some questions. I would, in their shoes.

"I'm Captain Hiro, a mercenary. Here's my ID. This girl is Kugi Seijou, and she's a member of my crew. This is my Maidroid, Mei."

When I introduced them, Kugi bowed, and Mei lowered her head.

"Oh, yeah. I saw you in that tournament." the soldier turned to Konoha. "And who are *you*?"

"I am Konoha Hagakure, a temple guard for the Holy Verthalz Empire." Konoha showed him an information terminal I hadn't seen before. Verthalz must've trained her to use electronics before dispatching her to a remote planet. Kugi had no clue how to use that stuff, though she'd probably figure it out before long.

"From Verthalz? Sorry, but I need to ask you to come with us for questioning."

"Very well."

A soldier in slightly different power armor—probably the captain—showed Konoha to the armored car they'd arrived in. I guess he didn't want us commoners to hear him question a foreign military officer.

"I'll take over your questioning." Another soldier, this one wearing heavy military-grade power armor, filled in to quiz me. "You fought alongside her, right? Tell me everything that happened."

I obeyed, giving him the whole story. "Right over there... Uh, actually, I got a little turned around while those things were chasing me. But they attacked a nearby power armor shop while I was trying on a suit. I killed one, but three more showed up, so I lured them away and defended myself for as long as I could."

"Okay. And then?"

"Well, I figured three-on-one was pretty bad odds, so I was focused on buying

time. But then Konoha—the woman who just got taken away—passed by. That’s when things went really nuts. See those black bloodstains around us? You might not believe it, but those were all her doing.”

The soldier shot a glance at the black metal spiders’ remains. “You’re kidding,” he replied in disbelief.

“What would I gain from lying? Mercs might pad their own accomplishments, but we don’t talk up other people’s wins, especially if they make us look bad. Right?”

“Fair enough. Hmm... How’d she destroy them?”

“Don’t make her mad. She’ll crush *you* to bits, power armor and all,” I replied cryptically.

“Remind me to stay away from Verthalz...”

I empathized with that wholeheartedly. It’d be smart to stay on their good side, for sure. “I’ll give you the armor shop’s address. If you want to be thorough, ask for the shopkeeper’s testimony. Oh, and that’s where the metal spider I finished off is—I neutralized it by cutting off its legs. So you’d better swing by if you want to gather all their remains.”

“Understood. Unfortunately, I’ll need all of you to undergo quarantine.”

Huh? Quarantine? Then they must know those spiders were living things, not battle bots. Well, I already realized the Imperial Fleet keeps tabs on things.

What? You thought these guys were the colonial security team? Nah. Wyndas Tertius might’ve been one of the Empire’s biggest colonies, but that didn’t mean colony security had access to military-grade heavy power armor. These guys were clearly Imperial Fleet marines.

“Since I was wearing this armor, I should be fine,” I pointed out. “But all right. Okay with you, girls?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Yes, Master.”

Hearing their simultaneous responses, the power-armored soldier glared at me.

“What?” I said.

“You’re into some weird stuff, man,” he groaned.

“Get off my back.”

Just to be clear, I’d never asked Kugi or Mei to call me those things.

“Troublesome as this is, you needn’t worry about me,” Konoha had said before the marines took her elsewhere.

I knew I didn’t need to come to her rescue. I doubted the Grakkan Empire was interested in starting a dispute with Verthalz. On top of that, if Konoha decided she was in hot water, there was no way she couldn’t overwhelm those power-armored marines. To kill her without a spaceship, they’d have to do something insane like expel the whole district into space, citizens and all. Surely not even Konoha would survive being thrown into the dead of space.

I mean... She wouldn’t, right? It’s terrifying how I can imagine her strolling through outer space with the smuggest expression.

“We may question you again regarding this matter at a later date,” a soldier told me. “You’ll need to remain in the colony until our investigation is complete.”

“Got it.”

After my interrogation, I was taken by armored car to the Imperial Fleet garrison, where I was stripped of ninja armor, clothes, and everything else before receiving a disinfection treatment. They even went beyond that and subjected me to procedures like nanomachine decontamination. Those metal spiders were likely some unknown alien beings, after all; anyone would be cautious about possible disease.

Finally, I was released. Following full disinfection and nanomachine decontamination, the soldiers returned my clothes. They also offered to ship my ninja armor from the garrison directly to the *Krishna*, and I agreed. I'd hate to startle people by walking around town in that.

Outside the garrison, Kugi and Mei greeted me. "Sorry I kept you waiting," I said.

"We were only just released ourselves, my lord." The way Kugi's tails wagged was adorable.

How Mei stared at her bothered me, though. "Master."

"Yeah?"

"I am able to attach a feline tail and ears as optional parts."

"Any reason you'd bring that up right now?"

"I thought you might be interested." Mei stared at Kugi's three fluffy tails again.

Oh—because I was looking at Kugi's? Cat ears and a tail might look cute on Mei; the quiet black cat image would suit her. But an emotionless maid robot with cat ears who turns lovey-dovey when you're alone with her... That'd just be too many tropes in one basket. Although Kugi's an obedient, silver-haired, sheltered shrine maiden with three tails and animal ears, so I guess she's about equal in that regard.

"I'll give it some thought. If they're easy to put on and take off, anyway."

"I will look into it. Meow."

"Pfft!" If I'd had a drink in my mouth, I would've spat it out. Meowing just wasn't fair.

"Er...yip, yip!" Kugi piped up.

"Gah!" I couldn't take it anymore. *Okay, girls, I surrender. Stop, okay? If looks could kill, the marines guarding the garrison gate would have me skewered by*

now. Anyone would be pissed if they had to watch this exchange while trying to do sentry duty; I sure would. “For now, let’s head back to the hotel. Mimi and Elma must be worried.”

The girls assented, and the three of us began the walk. It was a little far, but there just weren’t any trams heading close enough to the hotel to take one.

“Man, Konoha’s powers were something else,” I mused on the way. “I still can’t wrap my head around it.”

“Was she pretty strong?”

“I struggled to cut through *one* spider with a monosword, but she sliced up three instantly, twisted and crushed three others without even touching them, and then picked one up and slammed it into another until they both died. Plus, she moved even faster on her own than I can with my power armor.”

“That sounds troubling.” Mei was oddly pensive.

“Frankly, I see no way I’d beat her in a fair fight,” I admitted. “I don’t know if anyone in the Empire could, without a spaceship. Maybe a Titan-class combat bot’s mass and firepower could withstand her.”

While Mei and I discussed how to beat Konoha, Kugi timidly interrupted. “Er, my lord? Konoha is a temple guard. A warrior of my homeland. I don’t think you should expect her to be hostile toward you.”



The way her ears drooped made my heart hurt a little. “I know, but this type of conversation is kind of an occupational disease for mercs. When we see something that powerful, we start hashing out how to fight it. I guess it isn’t very productive, though. It’d be better to discuss those metal spiders.”

“Yes, my lord. I must agree.” Kugi’s ears popped right back up. It was adorable. Mei stared at her ears too, maybe trying to memorize the movements.

“Man, those metal spiders. Monoswords could injure them, but laser guns had no effect at all. They might be really resistant to photothermal weapons in general.”

“You say laser guns had no effect, Master. Can you explain further?” Mei asked.

“If a laser hit those spiders, it didn’t trigger a vaporization explosion. Based on that, I doubt plasma weapons would work well either.”

“I see. Considering how the spiders were destroyed, physically destructive weapons—EMLs and gunpowder-based firearms, for example—might indeed be more useful than photothermal weapons.”

“The way EMLs pierce things makes them risky in ships and on colonies, and I’ve never seen gunpowder weapons in the Grakkan Empire.”

If there were still weapons that used gunpowder in this universe, I definitely wanted them...as collectables, anyway. Laser guns *were* way more convenient. They were super lightweight, one energy pack fired hundreds of shots, and just a few of those shots could saturate a target’s personal shield. Laser guns were quiet, too.

Firearms that used gunpowder were heavy, and to fire a lot of shots you had to carry multiple magazines. Besides, a gun small enough to walk around with could never break through so much as a personal shield. If there had been a high-spec explosive you could load into bullets without adding much weight,

that might've done something in battle. Still, even in that case, you might as well just use a laser gun. Yep, firearms that used gunpowder would just be hobby weapons in this universe.

"Then I will do my best with these," Mei said, pulling out a shiny black spike.

If she throws them, yeah, those super-heavy metal spikes might just be effective. And should I get Tina and Wiska to make some kind of mace I can carry around with power armor? Nah, guess that's not necessary. Its usefulness would be too limited.

"If it comes to that, I'll be happy to rely on you. Still, I think I want to train my psionic powers so they're like Konoha's."

Visualization was supposedly crucial to using psionics, and the fight with the spiders really had been an opportunity for observations I could apply that way later. I was determined to do nothing but my best.

Epilogue

“HOW DO YOU BUMP into trouble just by walking outside?” Elma groaned.

“That’s Master Hiro for you,” Mimi sighed.

“Would you stop acting like I go looking for fights? I didn’t do anything wrong.” I’d genuinely gotten caught in *existing* trouble...which, I confess, was typically how things went.

“Monsters that looked like melee spider bots, huh? Wonder where they came from,” Tina mused.

“And laser weapons didn’t work on them,” Wiska added. “I’ve never heard of anything like that before. It could be a revolutionary material for forging armor!”

The information Kugi and I had brought back fascinated the mechanics. Like us, they’d never heard of those weird spiders.

“Ya sure those things were alive, hon?”

“That’s what Kugi and I thought, but we’re not certain. They had some kind of black blood, and we felt mental activity—brainwaves—coming out of them.”

“Hunh. And ya don’t feel those brain waves from Mei?”

“Correct,” said Kugi. “I am unable to sense mental vibrations from Mei.”

“Same.”

“Interesting. It seems more and more likely that those metal spiders were living organisms,” Mei noted. Her expression turned thoughtful. I tried not to wonder what she was thinking. She wasn’t imagining how they *tasted*, was she? Surely not.

“A-anyway, if they were living things, this could be a huge discovery,” I continued. “I doubt the military would shrug off a creature with skin they could use as a plating material. Ugh...I’ve got an ominous feeling about this.”

“Hey, don’t tempt fate!”

The instant Elma complained about my musings, my small terminal rang. *Bzzzzt!* I’d picked that “earsplitting ‘incorrect’ buzzer” ringtone for someone very specific.

I took out the terminal silently and checked the caller—then looked to the ceiling in utter anguish. Guessing their identity easily based on my reaction, Elma buried her face in one hand and sighed. Mimi grinned sardonically. Mei’s expression didn’t change, but Kugi cocked her head; it was her first time seeing this.

I answered. “Yes...?”

“Your eager greeting is appreciated. It warms my heart.” The voice coming from the other end was none other than Colonel Serena. Her tone was flat, making it all too clear that she was in a bad mood. “Well, I’m sure we don’t need to bother with pleasantries. I’ll be frank—this is work-related.”

“Sorry, our mothership’s in maintenance. Can’t take on a new job. Aw, too bad.”

“Naturally, this would take place after that maintenance is completed. We are well aware of your circumstances. I haven’t contacted the mercenary guild yet, but we have decided internally to formally request they send you this offer at three times the usual rate. Accept the request, please.”

“Hey, even if you ask for me specifically, I have the right to refuse.”

“Accept the request, please.”

“I just said, requesting me doesn’t—”

“Accept. The request. Please.”

“Are you just gonna repeat that until I say yes?!” *Knock it off. That flat tone creeps me out.* Serena was being even pushier than usual, which only strengthened my bad feeling. Why was I scared? Well, whenever I had those feelings, I rarely if ever escaped the disaster they heralded. “Look. I’ll hear you

out, okay? I'm switching you to holo-call."

"Please do."

Once she'd agreed, I connected my terminal to the hotel room's holo-display, switching from voice call to holo-call. Serena's extremely unhappy face appeared on the display, and the girls started whispering to each other.

"She looks like she's in a bad mood."

"Still, even when she's angry, Colonel Serena is so lovely."

"Yes, she's very elegant."

I didn't know whether Serena could hear them, but I wished they'd stop. At least they weren't saying anything mean; if she did hear, it'd probably be fine.

"So what's the request?" I asked.

"It's top secret."

"Is this a joke? I'm hanging up."

"That's all I can say at this time. Please wait until the mercenary guild sends you the formal version."

"What was the point of calling me now, then? If you can't tell me anything, I can't make any promises."

"Don't you understand how I feel, having been ordered to explain things to you in advance owing to our close relationship?" Serena smiled sweetly. It was scary, because her eyes weren't smiling at all.

"Well, sorry they saddled you with that. Can they still force you to do grunt work now that you're a colonel?"

"As a platinum-ranker with a Gold Star and honorary noble title, you're more important than you probably think. Even with my current title, I couldn't communicate so freely with you if not for our personal relationship."

"Really? Well, I guess this is better than having some stranger barge in and demand I work for them."

“May I presume you’ll accept the request, then?”

“Well, no. I didn’t say that.”

There was a long pause as we stared at each other expressionlessly. *Look, glare all you want, but I’m not saying yes to anything before hearing some of the terms.*

“Be serious. You know I can’t accept a request, top secret or not, until I know the requirements and rewards.”

Things might’ve been different if we were poor mercs living hand to mouth, but this crew had enough Ener to lounge around the hotel for months on end. Plus, once our ship maintenance was done, we could go to any system we liked, hunt pirates, and make more cash. It was also hard to estimate the risk involved in this mysterious request, so I had exactly zero good reasons to accept.

“I suppose I have to agree with you.”

“Then it sounds like this conversation is done.”

“It can’t be helped,” Serena sighed. “By the way, I hear there was a murder spree in an upper-class commercial district today.”

She changed the subject. What’s she after now? Is this related to those metal spiders I helped fight off? She has good connections if she’s bringing those up already. “Uh-huh... Go on.”

“The colony security team and a passing mercenary apprehended the culprit, but seven residents died first. And to change the subject for no particular reason *again*, an exploration ship recently returned to that same colony after edge world exploration. It had several interesting items in tow, one of which was purchased by a shop previously located in that high-class shopping district. Oh, and coincidentally, every one of the seven people killed worked at said shop.”

“Whoa. That got real sketchy real fast.” The murders were obviously related to that research ship and its trip to an edge world. Serena bringing it up now

must imply that it connected to her request somehow.

Remote frontiers of space—edge worlds—weren't like rural areas back on Earth. They were sectors newly incorporated into Grakkan Empire territory, which meant they were on the front lines of expansion. Imperial law was lax in those areas, and space pirates and monsters ran wild. There was no shortage of other dangers as well: interference from hostile nations, uncontacted alien races and other lifeforms, and outlaws who'd built their own independent "kingdoms."

"What I'm hearing is that the military's sending your beefed-up Pirate-Hunting Unit to an edge world to take the reins in one fell swoop, huh? And now that you've learned that something weird of alien origin is involved, you're collecting all the info you can on it?"

"You have such an active imagination, Captain Hiro. For now, let's just say that the Pirate-Hunting Unit, particularly its leader, has become well-acquainted with how to utilize you best."

"Uh-huh."

Guess she can't tell me any more. Based on the conversation so far, though, accepting this request would probably put me under her command.

Serena *was* getting good at utilizing me, and she was a familiar ally. She wouldn't ask anything *too* ridiculous of me... Well, okay, she might. But hopefully she wouldn't give me impossible orders.

"I'll think about it. Accepting will depend on how the conditions work for us. We have our own plans, after all."

"That is a sufficient answer for now. I must be going." Serena hung up.

"So?" Elma asked me. "Plan to accept the mission?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. Like I said, it depends on the conditions. If the Ener's good, though, I don't see myself refusing a decent offer."

If we could earn three times the market rate just by accompanying Serena,

and potentially more on top, the contract would be way more profitable than chasing third-rate pirates around. We'd spent a lot of money at this colony, so a get-rich-quick mission didn't sound bad at all.

"I wonder what preparations we'd need to make to go to an edge world," Mimi remarked.

"Working with the Imperial Fleet means we don't have to worry about ammo, plating, structural materials, or essential rations. But we might not have enough other daily necessities and luxuries to last us for a long frontier stay."

"In that case, if we take the job, I'll consult with Mei and look into stocking up on those supplies."

"Thanks, Mimi."

"Looks like I'd better get used to the *Antlion* fast," said Elma. "I hope I'm not forced to learn through real combat."

"Er...what should I do?" Kugi asked.

Mimi and Elma were used to prepping for upcoming requests, so they already had an idea of what to start looking after. Kugi had no experience, though, so she couldn't do the same.

Hmm, yeah. No-brainer. "Kugi, I'd like you to study to be an operator so you can support Mimi."

I planned to have Mimi gain sub-piloting experience, after all. We'd promote her from operator to sub-pilot someday, and the open operator spot could go to Kugi, although that would depend on her aptitude for the work. Mimi had put in the effort to become a full-fledged operator in almost no time, but we didn't know whether Kugi could do the same. And, hell, maybe Mimi would struggle as sub-pilot. In that case, it might be worth training Kugi on that job. *Argh...too much to think about.*

At any rate, we couldn't do much until our ships were ready. Serena and the Imperial Fleet sure seemed to know a lot about our schedule in that regard. So

much for my privacy.

Mulling it over, I looked at the hotel ceiling and sighed.

Afterword

THANK YOU FOR PICKING UP Volume 11 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! Wow, new record. Go me! And thank you all so much!

This summer's been a scorcher. I finally installed a personal AC unit in my house. Hooray for modern conveniences! We Hokkaido residents tend to melt as soon as the temperature goes above 25 degrees Celsius.

As for the usual discussion of which games I'm playing, the highlight this round is a certain robot-combat game that finally got a sequel after more than ten years of waiting. (The children yearned for robot-based warfare.) I'm a little proud that I noticed how overpowered shotguns were before it went viral on social media. I also played a visual novel where you lead an exploration team on an untouched island, interact with islanders, loot treasure from temples, and more.

As I write this afterword, I'm also planning to play a game where you travel through space on a spaceship. I haven't had time to upgrade my PC lately, so I've decided to buy a certain boxlike "X" console from Company M. I prefer not to look at trailers or other prerelease info, so I can't wait to see what adventures await!

Enough about me. Let's talk about the book a little bit.

In this volume, we have a new heroine! A foxy one at that. There's this very unique thing that I do where I keep pulling fantasy elements into my sci-fi series. Yep, only I do that. Trust me, don't look it up.

Of course, it's true that sci-fi often deals with unscientific and spiritual things like psionic powers, religious civilizations, and the like. For instance, knights who use swords of light to deflect beams. Force push!

Hiro's psionics in this book differ somewhat from in the web novel, so events will change accordingly. In a way, this is like a second playthrough of a video

game. Look forward to future developments!

In this end-of-volume worldbuilding discussion, I'll focus on FTL technology.

There are several kinds of faster-than-light travel in this story. The standard interstellar navigation technology is hyperlane travel, which uses subspace routes to connect star systems. Power is generated between two stars, then flows through space to create a hyperlane. Hyperlane travel uses those subspace highways to move faster than light.

Other faster-than-light technologies mentioned in this work are simply called "FTL." They might entail gravity and mass-manipulation technology for travel within a star system, psionic jump-navigation tech developed in Verthalz, or gateway wormhole navigation technology.

I'd like to leave those concepts a little vague, especially when it comes to the scientific stuff, you know? I mean, if I could explain them perfectly, then I'd be rich and famous for developing humanity's first faster-than-light travel method instead of writing fiction.

Broadly speaking, hyperlane travel technology allows ships free rides on superhighways between star systems, gravity-based FTL travel manipulates a ship's mass to move it faster than light with high-output thrusters, psionic jump technology teleports ships through spaces similar to (but not the same as) hyperspace, and wormholes bend space to connect two distant locations directly.

Some other travel methods, like simple teleportation between two places, haven't shown up in the books yet. There might even be more technologies, if I think of them!

Now I think it's time I take my leave once again.

Thank you to my manager, K; our illustrator, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima; and everyone involved in this book's publication. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this book.

Next stop, Volume 12! Come on out, Volume 12!

RYUTO

About the Author

Ryuto

A BROWN BEAR LIVING IN HOKKAIDO.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.



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