

the great adventure of the

DIRTY PAIR

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The novel that inspired the hit anime series!

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THE GREAT ADVENTURE OF THE DIRTY PAIR

chapter 1

what's the big idea?

We went into orbit around planet Dangle.

Moments later ground control sent us a Who-Are-You. That in itself was pretty unusual. Usually an orbital relay station handles that kind of red tape. It takes too long to respond to problems from planetside. But according to the background material I'd been boning up on, there were only five space stations in orbit around Dangle, and all of them were research platforms belonging to the Gravas Foundation. There wasn't a single public station for orbital traffic control.

Giant space stations are different from dinky little satellites. There's a limit to how many you can have in orbit; five is about the max. Seeing how planet-state Dangle was under the de facto control of the Gravas Foundation, I don't suppose they had any choice about giving Gravas exclusive rights to station construction.

When the standard call from flight control came through, I lightly tapped one key with the glittering orange-pearl fingernail

of my right index finger. An image blipped onto the communication screen.

This guy was my kind of dreamboat! Oooh, yummy! Just looking at him made my mouth water. Hurriedly I clapped my left hand over my mouth. Then I gave the young flight controller a chirpy but melting smile. He was a real innocent. In a flash he went bright red out to his earlobes. Mmm-mm, what a cutey!

I let out a little-girlish voice, just a bit nasal, and absolutely sweeter than anything else in the universe.

"Do you . . . want me? For, something?"

"Uh-uh-uh. Uh. Uhhh Uh. Ahem!"

Just as I'd planned, he was completely flummoxed.

"Uhem, uh, your, shi— uh, ship registration and, bo— body code, code, code numb— bum-bum-bver and your p-p-p-passpassengers' na-names!"

"Goodness! Our names!"

I widened my eyes, and covered my mouth with both fists. The gesture flipped him out again.

"Yaiee I-I-I, oh no! No, this this this is reggur, uh, regulations only. I mean, that, uh, actually it's not that I personally uh uh uh want to know, I mean . . ."

"I see," I said, softly cutting him off in mid-sentence. Not dropping the shy routine for an instant, I lowered my voice even more.

"I'll report . . . immediately. But—" a perfect pause. "After that, you have to tell me your name and phone number?"

"Eeee-heek!"

Driven to distraction, the controller could hardly speak. Usually when I get 'em this far, it's my pace all the rest of the way. I raised

my lips close to the built-in camera above the communication screen. Of course, on his screen that put them in super close-up.

"My name is . . . Kei," I breathed. "I'm still just nineteen really I am. My ship is an 80-meter-class vertical lander. She's called *Lovely Angel*. Her registry code is Amor. She belongs to Three W—"

"Di-Dirty Pair!"

My report was cut off in mid-word as the traffic controller suddenly choked out a half scream. I flung myself back into my seat and checked the screen. The controller's face, flushed and steaming just moments before, was as white as a sheet. His eyes were fixed and staring. Even his lips trembled in terror.

"Oh damn."

I'd struck too soon, I chided myself. But it was too late now. The panicked controller was talking like a machine gun.

"R-report-complete-and-approved-thank-you!" he shrieked, and instantly broke communications. All that was left was little old me, staring blankly at an already dark screen.

An annoying, high-pitched laugh broke out on my right. It was Yuri at the main controls. Touched to the quick, I wrenched my head in her direction. Her gaze, full of mirth, collided with mine, burning with anger.

Yuri gave another long, contemptuous laugh.

"What's so funny?" I shrieked, unable to stand her leer and laugh.

"Stood up again," said Yuri, narrowing her eyes triumphantly.

"Just shut up!" I retorted. "I was only toying with him anyway!"

"Stood up again," she repeated in a tone of voice calculated to rub me the wrong way. The blood rushed to my head.

"Phooey!" I shrieked. "Stood up, stood up, you say! It's not just me, you know! What the hell, it's because I'm teamed up with you that it always turns out this way! You've got a lot of nerve making fun of me."

In the face of my assault, Yuri promptly shut up. After a pause she sullenly added, "Always blaming someone else."

Somewhere, something snapped inside me. I swung myself back to face the console, pouting, and gave Yuri a sidelong glare.

"Why don't you just stop bitching and pay attention to the controls? If you get too distracted you'll fly us right into the ground!"

"No problem," she said, shrugging off my hysterical outburst. "I lined us up on the beacon and switched over to automatic long ago. We could land in our sleep if we wanted to."

"Arrgh!" I growled, discomfited by her mild rejoinder. There was nothing I could use to get back at her. This just wasn't my lucky day. I reclined my seat, and gave myself up to brooding. My legs, stretching sexily from V-cut shorts, rested on top of the console. Looking at them, I shifted my anger back to the space traffic controller.

In the first place, anyone who runs away from a beauty like me doesn't deserve to live. Oh, for sure, our reputation may be a little less than rosy! But that's the fault of the work we do for the WWA. It doesn't have anything to do with us personally now, does it?

Look, I'm 171 centimeters tall, and weigh just fifty-four kilograms. I measure 91-55-91. Those are just about ideal proportions, I'll have you know. My hair's red, and just a bit frizzy. But since I wear it in a stylish wolf cut, it's really quite becoming. My eyes are brown, and my skin's a creamy gold. Maybe I shouldn't say so myself, but I happen to be a cute, maybe just a smidgin boyish, beauty.

Now Yuri. Yuri, on the other hand, is 168 centimeters tall and weighs fifty-one kilograms. She measures 88-54-90. She's built a tad lighter than I am, but she's a beautiful girl with that lacquer black hair of hers hanging straight down to her shoulders. For a bonus, her skin is a contrasting lily-white. She's just like a little Japanese doll. There are times when I stop short just looking at her, and we're the same sex!

Then there are, you know, our clothes? They may have collars, but these skin-tight tops leave our midriffs bare. Add in our V-cut shorts and calf-hugging boots and we glitter in silver from head to foot, irresistibly sexy. You could search the whole Milky Way, but you wouldn't come up with a more tantalizing duo.

But that little brat of a traffic controller! Foaming at the mouth! Losing it the moment he heard we were the Dirty Pair! People like that should be thrown out with the garbage.

"That's right! He's a total idiot!"

Without thinking, I had vented my anger out loud. You'd think Yuri would be surprised to have me suddenly start shouting like that, but she didn't give me a second glance. I guess she's used to it. Instead, there was a whine from behind me.

"Meeow?"

I felt something lightly poke my shoulder.

"Is that you, Mugi?"

I turned around. It was, just as I'd expected—Mugi. He was sitting all of a heap in one of the two backup seats behind us. *Lovely Angel* is a small, eighty-meter-class starship. Actually, her combat capability and performance have been upgraded to make her a match for a two-hundred-meter destroyer. But she still has

only four seats in the bridge, and two of those are just for backup. Aaa-ah. Just once I'd like to flop a handsome hunk into one of those seats and go flying about the galaxy . . .

I drew my eyebrows together, and glared at Mugi. He was supposed to stay in the R & R room one level down when we were at the controls. Probably he'd snuck upstairs because he was worried about me having hysterics (again!). But rules are rules. Mugi gave me a mournful look, and curled up. The whip-like feeler with the suction-cup tip that he'd laid on my shoulder a moment before drooped away. He lowered his round black eyes and tried not to meet my gaze.

Mugi is a member of a near-extinct species of Mugis that have a big head similar to those of cat critters from Earth, but their jet-black bodies are twice again as large as mine. Their thick legs end in paws with razor-like claws, and from their shoulders grow two long feelers like the one that had tapped my shoulder. Since the feelers end in suction cups, they can do just about any kind of work that we humans can do with our hands. Of course, that requires quite a bit of intelligence as well, but they come equipped with that, too. They're believed to be as intelligent, and maybe even more so, than we are.

They also boast another special talent. This rests in the curly tendril-like long hairs that take the place of ears. By vibrating these tendrils they can manipulate electromagnetic waves and electric currents any way they please. We two mechanical dunces leave all the repairs and remodeling work on *Lovely Angel* completely to Mugi.

On the verge of extinction, there's only a handful left, so of course they've been designated a protected species. It was just by

chance that Yuri and I got Mugi. I could tell you all about it, but let's just skip that for now, okay? All you need to know for the moment is that along with all his other attributes, our pet has had his temperament improved by we humans. As for anyone else having such a pet, well, like they say, the Milky Way's a mighty big place, but you won't find anyone else out there who does. Once a day we have to feed Mugi a special kalium capsule, so his food bill costs us an arm and a leg. Still, Mugi's such a fantastic pet we don't give it a second thought.

"Mugi!" I said sharply. "Go back to your room!"

Mugi shook his head obstinately at first, but at last he seemed to realize that I really was angry. He slowly got down off the seat.

"Meeoooooow," he whined sadly, and plodded heavily from the control cabin.

Don't let him fool you. It was all an act. They are smart. They know exactly how to win a human being's sympathy. I saw him off silently.

"Oh, well," I sighed, and faced front again.

"Kei," said Yuri as if on cue. "We've got re-entry clearance. I'm going to land."

"Do what you like!" I said coldly. No one as unforgiving as I am was going to forgive Yuri for the way she had treated me just a few minutes before.

Lovely Angel steadily lost altitude as the ship traced a spiral orbit around Dangle.

Dangle, like almost every planet inhabited by mankind, is a beautiful blue sphere mottled with floating white clouds. The ratio of sea to land is just about fifty-fifty and there are two continents

separated by ocean. Almost all the land surface is concentrated on these continents—Eruka and Tanst.

Eruka is located near the equator in the northern hemisphere, while Tanst is near the equator in the southern hemisphere on the opposite side of the globe. Eruka is larger than Tanst, but both are equally blessed with absolutely the most marvelous climate. Count on the Gravas Foundation—with the most capital in all the galaxy—to pick a winner.

Lovely Angel was bound for Tanst's southern hemisphere. That's where our client, Gravas Heavy Industries, one of the industrial divisions of the Gravas Foundation, has its headquarters. That's right. Those guys. The kings of heavy industry, they who proudly boast that there isn't a job they can't tackle; from starship building to erecting entire cities. Gravas Heavy Industries has both a business headquarters and a production headquarters. The one on Dangle is the production headquarters, responsible for operations and research.

Our designated landing site was Kurutomi Space Port, smack dab in the middle of the Tanst continent. To be perfectly honest, we both of us prefer the ocean; we didn't want to have to land in a crummy old landlocked spaceport. But Kurutomi is as close as you can get to Gravas H.I.'s headquarters, so what's a girl to do? In the first place, we weren't here for the fun of it.

Our altitude was down to twenty thousand meters.

I don't know what magic they'd used, but Tanst was swathed completely in brilliant green. The cities glittering silver here and there against that backdrop made it look like a billiard table scat-

tered with cue balls. It must have taken a lot of terra-forming to bury an entire continent in grasslands and forest. But I wouldn't put it past them, not the boys from Gravas. Quite apart from the methods they might have used and whatever incidents there'd been in pulling it off, I had to give them credit. All anyone could feel about that endless green garden was its incredible beauty.

I was completely entranced by the landscape sliding past on our main screen, and for a moment forgot everything else.

That was when they attacked.

"Kei!" snapped Yuri in a sharp, crisp voice.

Emergency! In an instant I'd stopped moping, and was my old self again.

"Several ships aren't obeying traffic control," Yuri continued.

"Who are they? How many?"

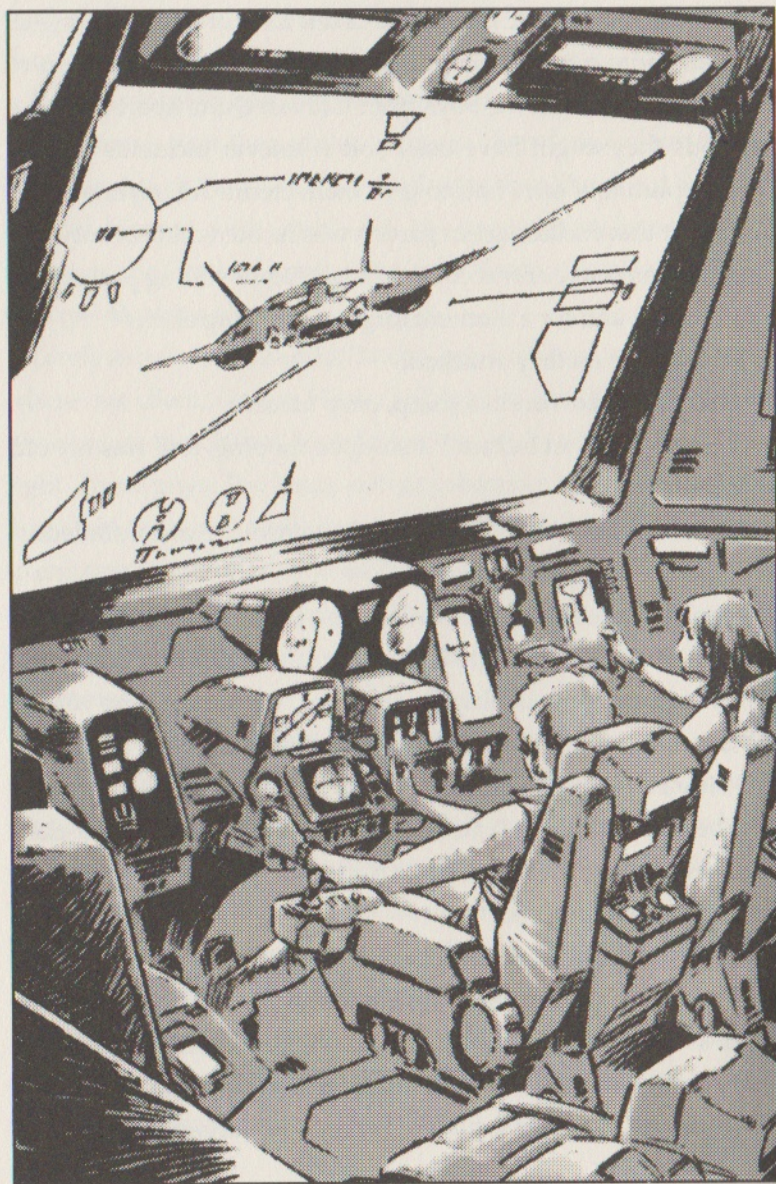
Even as I asked, I was activating the console's laser and missile triggers. It might turn out to be nothing at all. But a WWWA Crime Trouble Consultant is always prepared. Of course, one reason we'd been nicknamed the Dirty Pair was that we were always an itty-bitty bit too prepared . . .

"There're five bogies," came Yuri's answer. "Twenty-meter-class saucers! They're heading straight for us!"

"Do we have a visual?"

"I'll feed it onto the main screen."

Except for the emergency port, there are no windows in *Lovely Angel's* conical control cabin. Instead, we can check out each and every kind of situation on the dozens of large and small screens of all descriptions lining the wall panels. The largest one, located



directly in front of the pilot and co-pilot seats, is the main screen. We can call up any kind of image on it, from X-ray scans to enhanced imagery.

The main screen showed five flying saucers barreling toward *Lovely Angel*. The distant silver specks glittered against a background of dazzling blue sky.

"Enlarge one for me!"

The image shifted before I could finish speaking. Yuri had had the same idea. A single saucer filled the screen.

It was a kind I'd never seen before. It certainly wasn't on the commercial market. And of course, it wasn't one in military service, either, at least not officially. The two barrels protruding from the leading edge clearly went with some kind of energy weapon. Whoever the ships belonged to, this much was clear. They were fighters, and they were full of malice for *Lovely Angel*.

"Range twenty-eight thousand meters. Speed Mach twelve," said Yuri. "They'll be in range in a moment."

"Uh-huh!"

The palms of my hands were slick with sweat as I tensely gripped the triggers. If we were in space, our lasers would have had an effective range of nearly two hundred kilometers. But now we were fifteen thousand meters above Dangle. We were deep in the atmosphere. Lasers degrade tremendously in the atmosphere. Even at ten thousand meters it would be tough to hit the enemy hard enough to make them hurt. But if I used missiles it was as clear as day they'd just shoot them down.

"Range nineteen thousand!"

I flicked on the targeting screen. The saucers showed up as white blips. When they came into effective range, as adjusted by the computer for atmospheric density and all other estimated data, they'd turn red. That was when the fighting would start. But before that there was one last thing I had to be very sure of.

"There's no response."

Yuri had already done it for me. She'd sent the common interplanetary code message, "Identify your ship and affiliation." So long as their communication gear is working, any ship that ignores this call from a WWA starship is automatically considered hostile. We could fire when ready.

"Range ten thousand. Oh!" Yuri's voice changed in the middle of the countdown. "The saucers are fanning out!"

Just as I'd expected. The total energy load of a twenty-meter-class flying saucer couldn't begin to match the *Lovely Angel*'s. Their weapons probably weren't much good, either. If they flew in leisurely from dead ahead, and in formation at that, they wouldn't stand a chance. According to standard theory, now was the moment to re-deploy, and to attack us from all sides.

"Range eight thousand!"

The moment Yuri spoke, the flicks of light on the targeting screen suddenly went red. The saucers still gave no sign of attacking. We could strike first. I shouted a course change to Yuri.

"2F403!"

It was a bearing that betrayed my perfect confidence in victory. We were going to take them out, starting with the closest one and working our way out.

Like a raptor challenging its prey, *Lovely Angel* wriggled her elegant scarlet body.

I squeezed the laser trigger.

A streak of light flashed out, and sliced the saucer apart.

An enormous ball of orange flame dyed the blue heavens.

"4B112—"

We flipped back the other way without a pause. Of course, the enemy also reversed course, trying to keep us encircled. But we were faster on our feet.

Lasers fire!

Another enemy saucer exploded. Simultaneous missile launch—this just to tie their hands. I fired off three each at two of the enemy ships. One dodged them without a second thought, but its buddy was trapped. It popped up out of the way of the missiles, right into our path. I finished it off with the lasers.

That left two. But the distance was closing. They began to shoot back. A weak energy beam licked *Lovely Angel*'s outer plates. Even at two to one it wasn't a dogfight, not with this big a difference in performance. I blazed away, and another ship turned into burning fragments. One to go.

At that moment we made our decisive error. We'd gotten careless. We'd been so absorbed in the enemy that we'd forgotten to keep an eye on what was going on around us.

The first to notice was, as might be expected, Yuri at the radar screen.

"Uuuuhmffff!"

It was an indescribable sound, not quite a scream.

"What is it?"

"In the saucer's way," Yuri gasped. "There's a big civilian ship in its way!"

"Eeeek!"

The saucer, convinced it didn't stand a chance, was already running away. To suddenly have a big transport plod into its path spelled disaster. Transports aren't only sluggish, they don't have anything to protect themselves with.

"Accelerate out in front of the saucer!" I shouted impatiently.

"Impossible!" Yuri snapped back. "We're in the atmosphere. There's a limit to how fast we can go."

"Then raise the ship on the com-link and tell them to get out of the way!"

"You do it!" she wailed. Her voice was as edgy as mine. "I've got my hands full just flying this thing!"

"Got you!"

I switched on the transmitter, and hailed the ship on civilian frequencies. They responded immediately. She was the three-hundred-meter passenger liner *Galapagos*, as big as they come for planetary liftoff passenger ships. She was just making her approach to Kurutomi Space Port. Already she was well below four thousand meters.

Captain Guernicca of the *Galapagos* didn't even try to understand the situation, no matter how desperately I explained what was happening. Even as we talked, the flying saucer plunged ever closer to his ship.

In the end it was the Kurutomi Space Port control tower, not *Galapagos* herself, that grasped the gravity of the situation.

Instantly a warning went out. And receiving it, the liner finally began to plod onto a new heading.

"Oh! Ah! What the—!" Yuri shrieked, her eyes going round. "He's not just attacking! He thinks he's a kamikaze!"

"EEEH!"

I squeezed the laser trigger for all I was worth. The only way to stop him was to shoot him down. But the saucer was no sluggish when it came to running. Already he was too far away. The laser beams looked like they were scoring direct hits, but they weren't powerful enough to take him out.

The saucer swerved after the *Galapagos* as it wobbled into a turn.

It plunged smack into the main engine room at the liner's stern. And there was a very big bang.

"O-o-o-ohhhhhh."

Yuri and I couldn't bear to watch. We covered our faces.

Galapagos broke in two, and tumbled toward the planet below.

Of course, there was no way to save her.

"The bastard!" cried Yuri furiously. Her fists were clenched and trembling. "He knew he couldn't beat us in a fair fight, so he found this way to put us on the spot."

You said it, Yuri. We really were on the spot.

chapter 2

shut up or else . . .

Hi. My name's Kei. I was born on the planet Niogi on December 27, 2121. I'm nineteen years old. Three years ago I graduated from the university on Mezuiru, and joined the WWWA together with my partner Yuri. I'm just an innocent, sweet young maiden.

Yuri was born on March 18, 2122. She's from Yocha. And yup, she's nineteen, too.

Yuri and I got to know each other when we were in the same study group in the same class at the university on Mezuiru. We soon became fast friends. You couldn't find two people with more different personalities or tastes, but for some reason we were attracted to each other from the instant we met. It was strange how well we got along (there really was a reason for it, too, but that only became clear after we joined the WWWA).

It's been seven years now, but we've never been separated, not even once.

One day not long before we were supposed to graduate, we

were called in by our advisor and introduced to a gentleman waiting in his office. The man was a refined, scholarly type, about forty, who showed absolutely no inclination to tell us his name. Fact was, he was a scout for an organization we'd only heard rumors about before—the WWWA—Three Double-U A.

The WWWA's real name is the Worlds Welfare Work Association—it's one of the public bodies belonging to United Galactica.

As for United Galactica itself, well, I have yet to meet anyone who doesn't know what that is. Founded in 2134, with a membership of three thousand planet-states located in the Milky Way galaxy, UG is a pan-galactic peace cooperation organization.

It's just thirty years since scientists perfected the greatest dream of the human race, the warp drive. In that time, we humans—colonists, we call ourselves—have advanced steadily into outer space, filling the Milky Way from end to end. There are more than three thousand inhabited solar systems, and just about as many planet-states—states where the entire planet is the basic administrative unit.

My own home planet Niogi, and Yuri's Yocha, are both planet-states. They declared independence from Federated Terra a decade ago and joined United Galactica.

When you think about it, the human race has come a long way in just the three decades since it launched off into deep space. Incredible *vitality* is the word. I suppose that vitality must be a manifestation of the lifeforce of the species itself.

In recent years terraforming technology has been advancing by leaps and bounds. Nowadays even planets that once were left to themselves as unfit for human habitation are being rebuilt into

colonizable worlds. Some states even plan to terraform all the planets in their solar systems. At this rate, virtually every planet-state in the galaxy will have evolved into an even more advanced form of government within just the next few years—solar-states, perhaps?

Thirty years. Just thirty years and it's already come to this. It kind of makes you think the universe itself has blessed humanity's advance. As if it joyfully flung wide its gates of its own accord.

Can that really be true?

Well, I for one sure don't think so. Man doesn't control the universe; it hasn't surrendered. It's only given our human race an itsy-bitsy chance (and even that strikes me as incredibly generous).

Somehow we've been able to make good on that chance. Or we have so far. Of course the road hasn't always been easy. Why is that? Because naturally, the chance we've been given comes with its own set of trials attached. In countless shapes and forms, those trials have risen up before our species to block our way. Sometimes there've been terrible fevers, origins unknown. At other times, natural catastrophes beyond our control, like massive space currents or black holes. There have even been fights among us that have escalated into a test for the race as a whole.

There wasn't much of that in the beginning. We might take some damage now and then, but it was always limited, and never enough to sway the fate of the entire species. Or wasn't, that is, until the disaster that shook the very foundations of United Galactica, the infamous Kuraretta trinary star incident.

There's no reason for me to explain the incident here, so I won't. If you want to know more about it, just cart yourself off to the

library. Everything from the very beginning to the very end, all the way down to the secret stories behind the secret stories, has all been put down on microfilm. Just the standard encyclopedia entry would probably be all you need, though.

What was most significant about the Kuraretta incident was not the incident itself. It was that it finally pounded into the heads of the leaders of each and every planet-state an awareness that any kind of trouble, even the most trivial thing, can eventually escalate to the point that it threatens the existence of the whole human race if it isn't handled properly.

That was the background rationale for the founding of the WWWW six years ago. The WWWW seeks out, trains, and dispatches people who can respond to any and all kinds of problems with the potential to harm the species. The WWWW's agents either solve the problem themselves, or provide advice that contributes to finding a solution. It's a unique organization even within United Galactica.

To enable it to perform its mission, United Galactica has endowed the WWWW with awesome authority. WWWW agents—Trouble Consultants, we're called—have total freedom of access to any planet-state belonging to Galactica. We're granted complete authority to independently pursue our investigations. Trouble Consultants responsible for investigating criminal offenses in particular, are given *carte blanche* to use any and all kinds of weapons.

Even so, and I know this can be hard to understand—the WWWW is in no way an international police force, or a special military force. Each planet-state has its own independent police and army, and United Galactica has the UG Space Force. There's been no need to

go to all the trouble of creating yet another similar organization. No, in the final analysis, the WWWA always functions in the interests of all mankind. Its guiding philosophy is the "enrichment of life." In short, its welfare. I just thought you ought to know.

It's really hard to become a WWWA Trouble Consultant. Actually, hard isn't quite the right word. You can't just choose to become a Trouble Consultant. The WWWA chooses the people it needs, through its own scouts. I don't know what the standards are myself. The United Galactica central computer selects people throughout the galaxy who have the qualities and talents it takes. Then it sends a recruiter to meet them. Once you've been scouted, you undergo a year of special training. After that the WWWA assigns you to the field your particular talents best equip you to handle.

The WWWA scout who showed up a few days before our graduation was there to scout us. Believe it or not, he wanted us to be WWWA Crime Trouble Consultants.

Our stomachs flip-flopped. The shock nearly took our breath away. Yuri really did stop breathing for a moment; she was fit to suffocate on the spot. I can remember as if it were yesterday how our advisor, Dr. Chiban, moaned and buried his head in his arms when he saw us floundering about.

All things considered, it was a natural reaction.

Neither of us had any particular talent (or so we believed at the time). As for our grades, well, to be perfectly frank, they weren't exactly praiseworthy. If there was anything about us that set us apart from other people it was the fact that we were both (If I may

say so myself) actually quite beautiful, with pretty good figures (everyone did say so!).

Yet that obviously had nothing to do with the WWWA's selection standards. We were sure there'd been some mistake. We kept badgering the recruiter to tell us why we were being scouted. But that was one question he absolutely refused to answer. Later we found out that he couldn't have answered us even if he'd wanted to; he didn't have the slightest idea why, either.

In the end, we went along. WWWA Trouble Consultants are an elite. They're at the very cutting edge of society. But even better than that, they'd come to scout Yuri and me together. By then the two of us had already decided that we would be inseparable when we went out into the real world (and don't you get to thinking we're lesbians, 'cuz we're not!). But the real world isn't all roses, and we'd been fretting about whether we could really pull it off. And then, just at that very moment, along comes this incredible offer from the WWWA. If they'd scouted just me, or Yuri, we would have turned them down flat.

No sooner had we graduated than we were sent to the WWWA training facility on Shimogu. On Shimogu they stuff fresh recruits to the gills with new skills, from piloting spaceships to handling weapons or, as in our case, techniques of criminal investigation. We rolled our eyes at the thought of having to go back to school the minute we'd finished college. But we grit our teeth, and bore it.

So, at the end of the year we obtained our official licenses as criminal investigator Trouble Consultants and started on our new careers.

As for our job record, it's not something I'd want to talk to

strangers about. It's not exactly, you know, bad. We've solved every case we've ever worked on. It's just that the solutions weren't always very pretty.

As I see it, there are two ways to solve a case. There's the clean way, where you use peaceful means to bring everything under control. Then there's the other way, where you have to use coercion to force a solution on a problem whether it likes it or not. I don't know how economic Trouble Consultants go about it, but it seems to me that in our field, we always run into the gory second alternative. Even then, our cases have admittedly been just a bit too spectacular. An explosion here, an inferno there, and in the end we're left with a mountain of corpses and, incidentally, a solution.

Now it's my opinion that we always get cases that have the latent potential for turning out that way no matter who took them on. Public opinion seems to see it differently. Rumor has it that any case, even one as teeny-tiny as the point of a needle, will escalate to total war once we've been sent in. Of course that's just nonsense. If it was true they would have taken away our licenses long ago, now, wouldn't they?

A Trouble Consultant's codename is usually taken from the name of her ship. Our spaceship bears the sweet appellation *Lovely Angel*. Naturally, we should be called that, too. And this was true at least, in the beginning.

Nowadays, though, nobody uses that cute little title. Based on our style of work, almost before we knew it, everyone had taken to calling us the Dirty Pair.

Fortunately (does that sound odd?), clients can't pick their Trouble Consultants. The central computer sends the people it

judges best suited to the task, based on a detailed analysis of the case at hand. If they could choose, I suppose our work would dry up overnight.

Wherever we go, the word has always gotten out already, and people greet us with the same old look of consternation on their faces. That really makes the blood rush to our heads. Inwardly we scream at our clients to stop their blithering. This time, we pledge, we'll make a clean job of it. Though, somehow or other, quite against our will, it turns out the same as usual.

Nonetheless, starting off our investigation by sacrificing an entire civilian spaceliner carrying forty passengers and fifteen crew members—as we just had on Dangle—was a first even for us, the ill-reputed Dirty Pair.

○ ○ ○

"Who does he think he is, that snot-nosed pumpkin head?!"

I had started shouting at the top of my voice the moment we hit the road. We were riding in a gleaming black limousine. Yuri, sitting next to me in the back seat, and Mr. Meruton up front next to the driver, both covered their ears in disapproval. The driver was an android, and couldn't have cared less. The others could have learned a thing or two from him!

"You sure can be a loudmouth, Kei!" said Yuri angrily.

"What do you mean by that?" I retorted, springing to the attack. "You sure can keep your prissy poise after being put through all that!"

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Wrong!" I cried, provoked anew. "Don't you have any nerves?"

"Sure I do!" Yuri puffed out her cheeks. "Plenty—"

"Oh, forget it!"

It was hopeless.

Actually, it had all begun when we debarked from *Lovely Angel*.

Worn to a rag, thoroughly depressed by the crash of the *Galapagos*, we trudged morosely down *Lovely Angel's* gangway into the takeoff/landing port at Kurutomi Space Port.

Everything seemed a chore. We didn't even want to talk. All we really wanted to do if we could was hide under our blankets in *Lovely Angel's* sleeping cabin and sulk. But we could hardly do that. We had come here to do a job. Moreover, we still had to square away the *Galapagos* disaster.

Oh for sure, it had only happened because those UFOs had taken it upon themselves to attack us, run away, and smash into the spaceliner. But we still couldn't escape feeling responsible. As WWWA Trouble Consultants, it had been our duty to shoot them down before things went that far. Steeped in gloom, we went downstairs and got on the moving sidewalk. Yuri and I were both empty-handed, without even a bag to our name. We'd left Mugi behind in *Lovely Angel*.

We got off at the immigration counter.

Of course, all WWWA agents have free passes. We just flashed our ID cards, and we were through. I didn't much like the way the immigration officer stared at us though, as if we were a couple of monsters. If I'd met him in the street, he never would have gotten away with it.

We took the elevator to the first-floor lobby—where we found a group of men waiting for us.

There were about twenty of them. They were all tall, keen-eyed, and wrapped in black coats. Some of them even had on sunglasses. We hesitated before approaching them, afraid they might be gangsters. It wasn't because we were scared of them, mind you. We were just scared of jumping to conclusions and getting into a brawl. Once—on planet Berosu, I think it was—we'd mistaken some actors on location for real gangsters and beaten them to a pulp. We didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

All twenty pairs of eyes followed us as we stepped out of the elevator. I felt a little uneasy as to what the following minutes might bring. One of the men stepped forward.

This guy didn't have a coat. He was wearing a black, three-piece pinstriped suit with the flair of a fashion model. Besides which, he was just incredibly handsome.

He looked thirty-four, maybe thirty-five. He had a fearless face with a strong, well-shaped nose. A shock of dark brown hair hung over his forehead. He was breathtakingly sexy. His aquamarine eyes glinted like priceless jewels, and when they turned on me they sent a shiver down my spine, turning my knees to jelly.

He was even taller than the gang of beanstalks around him, easily topping 190 centimeters. He was terribly lean, but his sharp movements bespoke of iron muscles.

The man smiled softly, revealing a glimmer of pearly white teeth.

Oh, he was too much. I was walking on air. Take me!

In a deep voice at once masculine and tender, the man spoke—

"Aren't you cold in that getup?"

In a moment I was myself again. What's it to you, buddy?! What's the big idea, ruining my good mood?! I don't need you



advice. It may look bare to you, but we're completely protected, not only where there's fabric but where it looks like our skin's exposed, too. We're encased in a transparent sheathing of ultra-thin reinforced polymer. The polymer was developed by WWWA's own research labs, and even gives us some protection against heat and bullets. That's more than a country bumpkin like you deserves to know!

I glared at the man as I rattled that off in my mind. Yuri seemed to have had the same reaction. She glowered at him as if he were her worst enemy.

The man noticed he'd made a blooper. Slightly flustered, he tried again.

"Ah, that was rude of me. You two young ladies wouldn't happen to be WWWA Trouble Consultants?"

So that was it. Well, why hadn't he said so in the first place? I let my expression relax a little.

"That's ri-ight," I cooed. "Are you from the Gravas Foundation?"

"No."

Mr. Handsome slowly shook his head. His every move was deliberate, and it was getting on my nerves; he smiled with the corner of his mouth. Another unpleasant premonition ran down my spine.

"My name is Bayleaf," he said. Still smirking, he spaced out his words momentarily. "I'm an inspector of the Dangle Central Police."

Eeek!

I let loose a silent scream. For a moment my whole body went rigid. Talk about things that don't get along! It's a rare combination

that can get along any worse than us and the local cops. I wildly cursed my hunch. It had, as usual, been right on target.

"Criminal Trouble Consultants Kei and Yuri," Inspector Bayleaf continued. "No, let's dispense with the formalities. We'll just call you the Dirty Pair."

We were stunned speechless. Pressing his advantage, Bayleaf became even more overbearing. Blast! If you want to keep things short, our official code name is Lovely Angel!

"Dirty Pair!" his voice grew even sharper. "The reason we've come to this space port today is to send you packing!

"The explosion and fire at Gravas Heavy Industries that you've been asked to investigate falls under my jurisdiction. I've determined that it was an accident. Of course, I conducted a thorough investigation. My conclusion is based on that investigation. No matter what angle you pursue, there is no room for doubt.

"But those fools at the Gravas Foundation! I don't know what got into them, but they went and petitioned the WWWA to reopen the investigation. And moreover. Moreover! The people they send to do it are none other than the infamous Dirty Pair! Do you expect us to put up with that?

"I wouldn't call it minor, but nonetheless, the explosion was unquestionably an accident. And now, to have it taken in hand by the Goddesses of Ill Fortune, to have it poked at, framed, to have upheavals, public order disturbed, murders provoked, cities destroyed, the very land itself polluted—"

"Oh just shut up!" I cried at last, breaking him off in mid-sentence. Left to himself, the inspector seemed ready to go on running us down in public forever.

"Spouting off just because we're taking it quietly. And you call yourself a man, blabbering on like that? Just when are you suggesting that we ever did anything like that!"

"When?" laughed Bayleaf mockingly. He began to count on his fingers. "The Castle of Geboro affair on Orius, the Baron Kitlock murder on Tevious, the child kidnapping on Kelbat, the Gaidle . . ."

Oh no. I cradled my head in my arms. The enemy had studied all about us. It would take more than a half-hearted effort to cut him down to size. But if we quailed now and returned home, it would be curtains for us with the WWWA. We had to give him a good, hard bite.

"Oh, those," I said nonchalantly, feigning calm. "Weren't those all incidents, not accidents? And didn't we solve them all?"

"Solve them!" growled Bayleaf, grinding his teeth. "What do you have to brag about! Each and every one of them was a textbook study of bloodshed and destruction! Solved them, you say? That's absurd. Are you following me? In the case of Orius, nobody has been able to live there since. It's a ghost planet."

Eeeeeek!

Again I gave a silent scream. Even I thought we'd rather overdone things on Orius, but I'd never dreamed it had been that bad. Even so, he would have to do better than that to daunt us.

"So just what the hell are you driving at?!" I cried in desperate counter-attack. A yummy-looking young gent glanced my way in surprise. Blast! Another man scared off for good. "Every one of those cases was bound to turn out the way it did! It's not our fault things happened that way!"

"Aha!"

Inspector Bayleaf raised his chin and looked down on us through narrowed eyes. It was a display of the most blatant contempt.

"In that case, I suppose you're going to claim it wasn't your fault that you fought a dogfight right over Kurutomi Space Port, dragging the *Galapagos* and fifty-five innocent citizens to their deaths!"

Ooof!

His words seemed to make an almost audible noise as they plunged into my heart. Damn! Using the very thing we were most upset about ourselves . . .

"Well, I suppose you can claim anything you want," continued Bayleaf, looking askance at us with a victor's pride. "After all, you're the almighty Trouble Consultants from the WWWA. So let it pass, let it pass. But I at least must ask you to settle the score. Isn't that so? If you don't, what consolation will there be for the fifty-five dead?"

"We feel exactly the same way," I said. Turning sentimental, I found myself agreeing with Bayleaf. But that was just the inspector's trap. What Bayleaf meant by settling the score was completely different from what Yuri and I had in mind.

"I'm grateful you agree," he said, with a snaky smile on his lips. "In that case, you can accompany me to headquarters now. Yes, you can stay there for forty days or so and help us answer a few questions."

"What!"

I was flabbergasted. The very idea was ridiculous.

"Why are you so surprised?" asked Bayleaf with an icy look on his face. "Didn't you just agree to settle the score?"

"No!" I wailed. "That's not what I meant!"

"I see. . ."

Again the contemptuous gaze.

"So I take it WWWA Trouble Consultants don't have the human compassion to mourn the dead?"

"How dare you!"

I exploded at Bayleaf words.

"Now you listen to me! What on Earth were you cops up to while we were being attacked by unidentified flying saucers? Were you sitting around sucking your thumbs and crying dearie me, dearie me? Or maybe you were just enjoying the show, waiting for us to make a mistake? How about it? On Dangle don't the police do anything when somebody starts a battle in your airspace?"

"What did you just say?!" roared Bayleaf. His face went crimson, then white, and finally black.

"We were waiting here to make you see reason and to send you back where you came from! And even while we waited—the *Galapagos* tragedy! As if that by itself wasn't more than we could endure, now you come and insult us to our faces!

"Very well! If that's how it's going to be, then to hell with the WWWA and United Galactica! I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget!"

"Very funny! Try it and see how far you get!"

"By God, I will!"

Sparks flew between us. Touch and go, we were only an inch away from a battle royal. It had gone beyond words. But just at that moment . . .

"Wh-what's going on here?"

A man burst hurriedly into the lobby. He was a short,

dignified-looking gentleman of fifty-five or fifty-six, clearly a top executive type.

"Damnation!"

Inspector Bayleaf ground his teeth at the sight of him.

"There were so many checkpoints along the way I was afraid something was going on," the man chattered at Bayleaf. "And sure enough, just look at you! Inspector, what is the meaning of this?!"

"You can see for yourself, Mr. Merutonan," replied Bayleaf in chagrin. The old gent was none other than our client, managing director Merutonan of the Gravas Foundation. "A spaceship has crashed, and I was just at the point of requesting some important witnesses to voluntarily accompany me to headquarters."

"You seem to be stretching things a bit," snapped Merutonan. "I speak for the Gravas Foundation in turning down your request. These two young ladies are here at the invitation of the Foundation."

"Mr. Merutonan," said Bayleaf. "It's true the Gravas Foundation virtually controls Dangle. Even so, I don't think it would be wise to make enemies of the Central Police."

"Say what you like," Merutonan said brusquely. "On my legitimate authority, I intend to take these two ladies with me."

"You do, do you?!" exclaimed Bayleaf, crumbling in the face of Merutonan's resolve. "Then do as you please!"

Bayleaf reluctantly left the lobby, his twenty underlings in tow.

"Now then," said Merutonan, turning to face us. He still spoke crisply from the previous argument, and his splendid bald dome gleamed with sweat. "I'm terribly sorry to have been so late. We'll go straight to Gravas Heavy Industries headquarters."



We were promptly bundled into a big black aircar limousine waiting outside the spaceport terminal. The limousine lifted off, and moments later we were barreling down the highway, due south.

chapter 3

who cares about vacations, anyway?

"Well, it wouldn't have happened if you weren't so slow on the uptake!"

Desperately pulling myself back together, I went back to belaboring Yuri. As for Yuri, just how do you like that? She was gawking at me, her face a picture of dazed stupefaction.

"The problem with you," I continued, "is that you always pretend as if nothing concerns you at all!"

"But golly," said Yuri, squirming on the seat. "You just got right up and started quarreling with the policeman, Kei. There wasn't anything I could do, was there?"

"Humph!"

I was at a loss for words. Oh, for sure, there was a mountain of things I could have said. Like, just what do you mean by that, Yuri? While you were standing there like a lump on a log, I was out there defending our honor all by myself. Boy, you've got a lot of nerve! I continued to seethe in rage.

But once Yuri takes that attitude, it doesn't matter what you say. She just floats away from you, until you wind up feeling like a fool yourself. I gave up throwing hysterics at her, and trained my sights on Merutonan, sitting in the front passenger seat.

"My, my, Mr. Merutonan," I said, starting him out gently with my velvet touch. "You certainly did take a long time getting to the airport, didn't you?"

"A— Ah, yes."

Merutonan turned to look at us over the back of his seat. He was clearly embarrassed.

"As I mentioned in the lobby," he said, "the police had checkpoints set up all along the highway. Moreover, they were the kind where they thoroughly check each car one by one."

"Wow! The police were trying to stop you?"

"I don't know if I was their target or not," said Merutonan. "But it did strike me as suspicious, so I had some of our staff look into it. Apparently each checkpoint was taken down after I'd gone through."

"Well that was pretty brazen of them."

I narrowed my eyes.

"They were scheming to turn us back or something before you arrived."

"The police were extremely angry when they learned that the Gravas Foundation had taken this incident to the WFWA," admitted Merutonan. "When they learned that the Dirty—ahem, the *Lovely Angels* were coming, they quite openly tried to pressure us."

"Really!"

"But we are, after all, the peerless Gravas Foundation.

That's especially true here on Dangle. We opened this planet and developed it just to locate the headquarters of Gravas Heavy Industries here. As far as the government of Dangle is concerned, our word is the law. It was only police pressure. We brushed it off."

"So that's why they resorted to force," I said, nodding to myself, and immediately resumed my questioning.

"But even so, why are they so prejudiced against us? Goodness, you don't suppose the police are involved in this affair?"

"That is most unlikely," said Merutonan, dismissing the idea out of hand. "He has a quick temper, but you might call that the flaw in a jewel. In all other respects, Inspector Bayleaf is a capable and honest police officer. As long as he's involved, it's safe to assume nothing underhanded is going on. Moreover . . ."

"Moreover?"

"According to a report by the Gravas Foundation's own intelligence apparatus, the police are innocent."

"Intelligence apparatus!"

I cried out despite myself at Merutonan's words. Yuri made a show of covering her ears. Just go jump in a lake, Yuri!

"Your intelligence apparatus!" I said. "A private organization as big as the Gravas Foundation must have dozens of investigative operations in several senses of the word, right? Just now you mentioned one of their reports."

"Yes," agreed Merutonan, tilting his head quizzically. "That's quite routine."

"So let me just ask you one thing. According to the rumor mills, at least, the information-gathering capabilities of the Gravas

Foundation's intelligence apparatus easily outstrips that of the United Galactica Space Force Intelligence Bureau Second Section. Is that really true?"

"I can't speak with absolute confidence, but generally speaking, that's true," acknowledged Merutonan readily. "We're especially strong in economics."

"Well, then. You petitioned the WWWA after your intelligence apparatus had already done its work. So, what are you really after?"

The overwhelming majority of the cases brought before the WWWA are initiated by national governments. Schematically, the process goes: incident arises—cops investigate—cops can't cope—cops report to the government—the government petitions the WWWA.

There are some cases, however, that don't follow this pattern. They're brought directly to the WWWA's attention by the private sector. There are times, for instance, when the claimant may be dissatisfied with the outcome of a case the police already consider closed. That was what had happened this time with the Gravas Foundation.

"What are we really after? That's a bit of an exaggeration," replied Merutonan serenely. "The greatest reason for our appeal was simply that the conclusions of the police and the contents of the final report prepared by our own intelligence people disagreed."

"The police concluded it was an accident," I said. "So, what was your conclusion?"

"Cause unknown."

"Wha—?" Caught off-guard, my eyes grew round with surprise. Merutonan continued on obliviously.

"Our intelligence people investigated the incident from three angles—one, that it was a simple accident; two, that it was a crime by someone inside the organization; and three, that it was a crime by an outsider. They spent a whole month on it, and in the end were unable to determine which if any of these was the actual cause. But what about the police? After just two weeks of investigations they concluded that it was an accident. We were disturbed by this discrepancy, and decided to take the matter to the WWWA."

"I see."

It all made sense. I was satisfied.

"The fact that we had real reason for concern," added Merutonan, "is proved by the WWWA's acceptance of the case. Am I not correct?"

Indeed, it was exactly as Merutonan said.

In the case of a private sector appeal, the WWWA doesn't just automatically dispatch a Trouble Consultant.

First, it has the claimant and the police turn over all their data. All the evidence is then input into the United Galactica central computer. If there is even the tiniest bit of a contradiction in the police's conclusions, a Trouble Consultant is dispatched to the scene, no matter how minor the case may seem to be.

The fact we had been sent to Dangle showed more clearly than anything else that more than a simple accident was involved. By the same token, that judgment had branded the police with the infamy of a botched investigation. That's the reason we always get along so badly with the local police. Even so, the hatred Bayleaf had shown toward us was simply too extreme.

"Well, you certainly have asked me a lot of questions," said Meruton with gentlemanly restraint. Perhaps he felt he should bridge the silence now that our conversation had petered out. "Weren't you told anything at all about the matters I've been explaining?"

"That's it!"

Yuri, who had been completely silent up to that point, suddenly let out a shout. Would you believe it? She'd even raised herself half out of her seat. Meruton and I gaped at her in surprise.

"That's the whole point!" she continued. "We were yanked into this affair without even time for that!"

Now I understood what she wanted to say. And of course, I wanted to say it, too.

When the central computer had summoned us we had been on F-Class standby—in other words, on vacation.

We'd been at Sanova Beach on Vanir.

Vanir is one of the Milky Way's most famous ocean resort planets. Sanova Beach is on the western seacoast of the Suvalean continent, which sprawls along Vanir's equator. It's an ocean swimming resort whose greatest claim to fame is its kilometer-long beach, blessed with shallow water far out to sea and covered with crystal-white star sand.

Ah, the limpid water, the gentle waves, the refreshing breeze, the hot, exciting rays of the sun! That was where we'd been passing our time when we got the call. What do you think would normally happen in such a case? Of course, we'd be screaming bloody murder. Ten or even twenty of the choicest words in our vocabulary wouldn't suffice to relieve our feelings.

But just this once, it was different. You see, this particular

F-Class standby had nothing going for it. Yuri had gotten the cramps and nearly drowned. I was nearly run down by a hydrojet boat. The knockout guy we tried to pick up turned out to be gay . . . In a word, this vacation had been the pits.

That's when we got the emergency summons from headquarters.

Stewing there with nothing to do, lying around on our backs topless, we'd bounded off Vanir and back into space as if the summons had been a blessing from heaven. Following headquarters' directions, we'd rushed straight to Dangle.

Nonetheless, the summons was unprecedented. We agreed to go because we just happened to be in a disaster zone at the time, but this one clearly belonged to that category our work rules term "refusable duties." If we hadn't wanted to go, we could have said no without any penalty at all.

When the WWWA decides to dispatch a Trouble Consultant, it first carefully studies the nature and facts of the case, then selects the consultant presumed to be most suited to the task from the list of those on A-, B-, or C-Class standby. Agents on D-, E-, or F-Class standby aren't even checked. The rotation schedule comes first.

I talk about Trouble Consultants as if we were all the same, but in fact, our work varies tremendously. Naturally, there are some people who are suited for a given assignment, and some who aren't. All the thousands and thousands of Trouble Consultants are carefully categorized by ability and personality, and those with similar inclinations are listed up into groups. The work schedule is decided within this framework.

Of course, this way of doing things means that sometimes only the second-best, or even the third-best choice for a case actually

gets assigned to it. If anything, that's what happens the majority of the time. In almost every case, the difference in abilities falls within the probability of error. Even if it doesn't, though, it's believed that you get better results by dispatching a Trouble Consultant who is well rested and raring to go than you do sending someone on D- or F-Class standby who has just finished his or her last assignment less than the mandatory one hundred hours before.

Be that as it may, we had been on F-Class standby, and we had been summoned.

There could be only one reason. The central computer had judged that we were the only people who could solve this case. Moreover, every minute was precious.

Without even time to give the data a good read through, we spurred *Lovely Angel* on and hurried to Dangle.

A silence had stolen over the interior of the aircar.

Even I, who had been doing my best to create a disturbance, now sat with my mouth shut, casting an eye over the landscape of Dangle flowing by beyond the windows.

A green plain spread before us as far as the eye could see. The white line of the highway meandered on without end. A truly monotonous scene.

Then, suddenly, I noticed a silver glitter far away on the right. It was a multi-faceted tower. Following it, a collection of other buildings came into view.

"That's it," said Merutonan, pointing at the buildings. "The headquarters of Gravas Heavy Industries."

We were guided to the managing director's exclusive reception room on the forty-eighth floor, at the top of the building.

It was the same multifaceted skyscraper that had been the first thing we had seen from the highway. As Merutonan explained it, there were forty-eight sides. Forty-eight sides and forty-eight floors. A tedious uniformity had been imposed on the building.

This being the very highest of high-class reception rooms, we had high hopes as we slipped through the door. But the interior was surprisingly plain. We'd been looking forward to some magnificent rococo extravaganza, so it was really a letdown. The room wasn't even very large. The dominant color was a sober silver-gray.

We were urged to take a seat on an angular sofa bordered with brown leather. Yuri and I plopped ourselves down side by side. My body had seemed to sink down with each step on the thick carpet, giving me unpleasant sensations. Merutonan sat down exactly opposite us. There was no one else in the room.

"What happens next?" I asked.

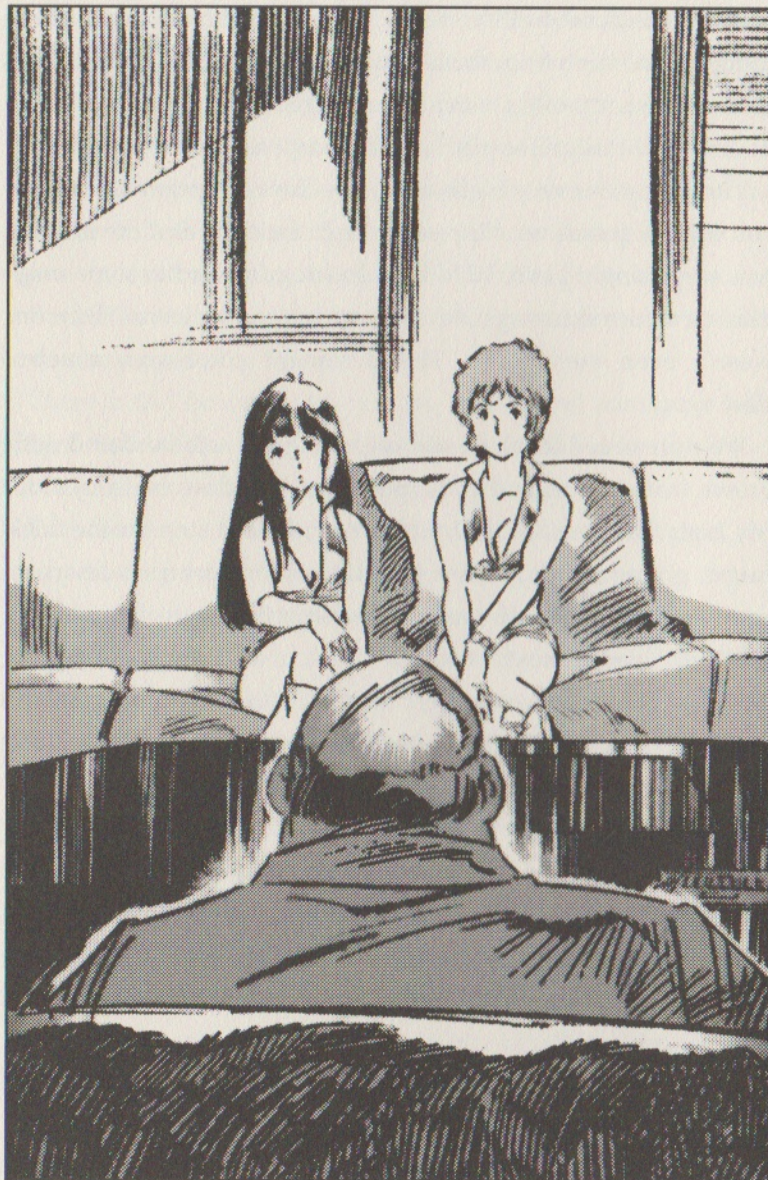
"I'll explain the case in brief," said Merutonan, running a hand over his bald pate. "Dr. Teppeus, the man in overall charge of our research centers, will be joining us later."

As he spoke, Merutonan pushed a number of switch keys on the edge of the table. The center slowly split apart, and out came a selection of drinks. Gravas, it seemed, valued function over form.

"What will you have?" Merutonan asked.

I chose tea with cream. Yuri took hot chocolate. You better watch those calories, girl!

"It happened approximately one month ago by the standard calendar," Merutonan said. "By Dangle's calendar, fifty-two days ago."



He waited for us to take a sip, then continued with his story. Dr. Teppeus still had not shown up.

"We know the exact time it occurred—4:02 a.m.—shortly before dawn.

"As for what happened, I believe you've already seen the report. Research Lab A-24, located three kilometers east of this building, exploded and burned. It was a tremendous explosion. Lab A-24 was divided up among seven buildings, located on a 2.4 million square meter tract. All the buildings were destroyed by chain explosions and flame.

"The facilities in each building and the lab's main research themes are much too complicated to explain now," he continued. "Please see the report later. However—and this is something I was thoroughly questioned about by the police—I can speak for whether or not there was anything in Lab A-24, any chemicals or experimental apparatus, that could have triggered such a huge explosion. The answer is, yes, there was. Consequently, while I certainly wouldn't say it was a natural explosion, it certainly was not an impossible one."

"So that's why you investigated the accident theory as well as the crime theory," I said.

"That's right," agreed Merutonan. He took a sip of coffee, and continued. "But before I get to that, I should mention that there was one more point of controversy. That involved the victim of the blast. As a result of an on-the-spot investigation, the remains of Dr. Angaron, or rather a shred of his remains, was found at the site of the explosion. Through cloning, it was firmly established that the remains were those of Dr. Angaron, and thus it was confirmed that

the case did involve a death."

"That certainly is strange," I said, nodding. "To have that big an explosion and still just one death . . ."

"No," said Merutonan, with a wave of his right hand. "Even one death was cause for controversy."

"Eh?"

"All our research labs are completely closed down after 1900 hours. There are various reasons for this—security supervision, labor agreements, and the like. But putting those aside for the moment, once the labs are closed, no one is allowed to remain inside the buildings for the twelve hours until 0700 the next morning. It is also impossible to get through the gates to enter the labs.

"What is even more peculiar is that Dr. Angaron was not even one of the researchers assigned to Lab A-24."

"Then where was he . . ."

"He was the director of Research Lab A-18, eight kilometers south of Lab A-24."

I groaned. No wonder people were making such a fuss about it!

"So," I asked, "were you able to find out what Dr. Angaron was doing in a completely unrelated laboratory at that hour of the morning?"

"I didn't say the labs were unrelated," said Merutonan, gently correcting my question. "Recently labs A-24 and A-18 initiated mutual exchanges concerning a certain experiment. That's according to the testimony of Dr. Teppeus, who should be here any minute now. Not only is he the overall director of our labs, but he is also director of Lab A-24 itself. Dr. Teppeus says Dr. Angaron was

keenly interested in this experiment. He suggests that that was the reason he went so far as to break the rules and stay behind in Lab A-24, and as a result, got caught in the explosion."

"Dr. Teppeus backs the accident theory?"

For some reason, that struck me as very peculiar.

"Dr. Teppeus has considered it an accident from beginning to end," Merutonan said softly. "That's probably one of the reasons the police concluded it was accidental."

"But that's strange," inserted Yuri. "The facts don't sound as if they can be explained away so easily."

"In any case, that was Dr. Teppeus's position based on his own leadership of the on-site inspection team," said Merutonan, draining his coffee cup. "But it's also true that our intelligence people were not convinced. No doubt there were a number of reasons for that, but by far the most important one is that Dr. Angaron's behavior was simply too abnormal."

"So there's something else about him?" I asked.

"He had disposed of virtually all his belongings," said Merutonan. "The only articles left behind were his favorite coat and briefcase, and then a single copy of the Bible—he was an ardent Christian. That was all. There was nothing else."

"That's weird!"

"Yes, well, in any case, it's because of this that we decided to appeal to the WWWA."

Merutonan leaned slightly forward in his chair.

"As for the rest, please investigate it yourselves, and find the truth of this matter. That's why I called Dr. Teppeus—"

At that moment there was a light electronic sound.

"Ah," said Merutonan, looking at the door. "He appears to have arrived."

He pushed another switch.

The door slid open and Merutonan got to his feet to greet the new arrival.

A tall man, grim and eagle-nosed, strode briskly into the room. He looked about fifty-four or fifty-five. Silver hair, piercing eyes. His cheeks were sunken, and he had a fearsome expression on his face.

Dr. Teppeus stopped in front of us. He glared at us for a moment. Then finally, he spoke.

"What do you expect me to tell these two little exhibitionists?!"

Those were Dr. Teppeus's first words.

chapter 4

we've got the power!

We had opened the curtains, and were looking outside.

From the forty-eighth floor you could take in almost all the research centers surrounding Gravas Heavy Industries headquarters in a single glance. In most cases, the laboratory buildings were scattered amidst expanses of forest and lawn.

I instantly located Lab A-24. There and only there, a whole month after the accident, the black ashes lay undisturbed. Not even the wreckage had been cleared away; it sat there like a black mountain.

Dr. Teppeus, after saying his fill for a full ten minutes, had promptly left again, claiming he was in the middle of an experiment. He was a real eccentric. Merutonan made a quavering apology in his place. Since the professor had kept repeating the same point, or rather, the same two points—"It was an accident," and, "These two little hussies," we didn't give his words a second thought.

"Mr. Merutonan," I said, suddenly turning to face him.

"Yes?" he asked. He had sat back down on the sofa. Now he scrambled to his feet again.

"We want to go see Lab A-24. Please show us the way."

"Pardon me?"

"It feels like something's about to happen!"

I winked at him.

"Ah, ahem," said Merutonan, his face reddening. "In that case, we can leave immediately."

We left the headquarters building and got into a much smaller aircar. Merutonan himself drove. Managing director though he might be, he apparently had little desire to use any of his subordinates. Come to think of it, even the driver of the limousine hadn't been human, but an android. The leadership of the Gravas Foundation must be taking this incident very seriously indeed.

Before long we reached the blackened expanse that had once been Lab A-24. We hopped out of the aircar.

Horrrifying, was the only word to describe that landscape.

The laboratory had occupied such a huge tract that nothing but desolation met the eye. The skeletons of ruined buildings poking up here and there only reinforced the impression.

"How . . . awful," said Yuri, as if the words had been wrung out of her. I doubt I could have said anything more myself.

"Even so, we were able to contain the damage to a minimum," explained Merutonan.

It seems each research center was allotted much wider grounds than necessary in anticipation of just such an accident as had occurred. The sites were further enclosed by twenty-meter-high fire-

walls that also served to keep out suspicious persons and industrial spies. Everything was designed to prevent fires from spreading to other sectors in case of a disaster. This time, the fearsome shock wave from the explosion had flattened the fence, but at least the hoped-for goal had been achieved.

"Now what would you like to do?" asked Merutonan.

"Pardon me?"

"The laboratory was in the center of this wasteland. Do you want to go that far?"

"Of course," I replied casually, as if it should have been completely obvious. "If we don't, how are we supposed to get our break?"

"Your break?"

Merutonan appeared not to have understood me. That was reasonable enough. But I didn't feel like explaining everything just now. He'd see once it happened, anyway. We got back into the aircar.

"Shall we go to ground zero?"

"Where did Dr. Angaron die?"

"The fragment of flesh was found at the site of the Pavlossa Memorial Laboratory, which was determined as the center of the blast."

"Then take us there."

The aircar crossed over into the burned-out territory. I expected it to stir up clouds of ashes, but I was wrong. More than a month had already elapsed, and everything had solidified. According to Merutonan, Gravas Heavy Industries could have restored this much land to its pristine state in just ten standard calendar days if

they'd felt like it. They hadn't done so in order to aid the search for the cause of the explosion. When we heard that, our responsibility seemed all the more onerous. What a drag!

Where the Pavlossa Memorial Laboratory had once stood there was now a crater that must have measured five hundred meters or more across.

"Gosh!"

Seeing it for the first time with our own eyes, we both caught our breath.

"I don't see how you could have found any remains here at all!"

"The police couldn't do it," said Meruton. "It was found by our own intelligence people."

He spoke a tad boastfully. How cute! And I was thinking he was so starchy.

"Yuri, come here!"

I called her over to me, and we joined hands. Don't think we were planning to take a walk or anything. For some time now I'd had this hot sensation running up and down my spine. That's why we joined hands. It was a sign that it was about to begin.

"It feels like it would be better to go to the center of the crater," Yuri said. I silently nodded in agreement, and we started walking. Meruton was looking at us with a puzzled expression on his face. I waved at him, meaning to say not to worry.

○ ○ ○

In five minutes we were at ground zero. The walls of the crater rose up around us like an inverted cone. Overhead was a crystal blue sky.

The heat began to engulf my entire body.

Still standing, Yuri and I faced each other and put our palms squarely together. Lightly closing our eyes, we slowly stretched our arms toward the sky as if we were giving a banzai cheer. As always, it felt as if we were being manipulated by something outside ourselves. Our hands would not come apart.

Something blazed in the back of my eye.

It was a flash of pure white light. Then a dizzying feeling of walking on air, followed by a tingling ecstasy. Everything went white.

An image appeared.

It appeared like a picture painted on a immaculate canvas.

It went out.

In a twinkling, color returned to my consciousness. At the same time I was assaulted by an unbearable lethargy. My legs were ready to collapse under me. I resisted with a willpower honed by long training. Slowly I felt my strength returning.

I opened my eyes. For a moment everything spun dizzily. Then it stopped.

Everything was as it had been before.

In this talent lay the reason for our being scouted by the WWWA. We, who had thought we had no talent at all, in fact had a wonderful ability concealed within us . . .

Clairvoyance. That's what the parapsychologists call it.

The first time we experienced it was in our second year of college. Like many other espers—people with extrasensory powers—the first manifestation of our ability was purely accidental.

A friend had lost a jewel on campus. That wasn't so unusual in itself. You hear the same story all the time. That is, if you leave out



the part about this jewel being a 120-carat plasmastone.

Naturally, there was an uproar. As to why she brought something as valuable as that onto campus in the first place, of course there was a reason, but it would take too long to explain here, so I won't. In any case, she brought it, and she lost it. The police were called in, and there was a great, campus-wide search.

In the middle of all that, Yuri and I fell into a trance in our dormitory room. It was at a moment when we just happened to be touching hands.

We saw an image pass before us.

It was an image of a red bird.

Needless to say, we didn't know what on earth to make of it. In fact, we didn't even know what had happened to us.

It was determined that the jewel had been stolen. The criminal was soon apprehended. Incredibly enough, it turned out to be one of our classmates. It was a shock when we saw her being led away, but it was even more of a shock when we found out that she was wearing a pin in her hair, in the shape of a red bird! The bird was unmistakably the same one we had seen while we were in our trance.

When we told our friends, not one of them believed us. It was an infuriating experience. Talking about it later, though, we decided we couldn't really blame them. If our positions had been reversed, we probably wouldn't have believed it ourselves. That's how extraordinary an incident it was.

Yuri and I pledged then and there that the next time we had the same experience we'd announce it to our friends and restore our honor.

The opportunity came sooner than we'd expected.

The next time was an accident involving our own advisor. He was hit by a speeding aircar, just two weeks after the case of the missing jewel. It was a hit-and-run accident.

Fortunately, our advisor escaped with only light injuries. But by the same token, there were no clues, and it was impossible to ferret out the criminal.

We—I know I shouldn't say this—saw that as a heaven-sent opportunity. We quickly shut ourselves up in our room, immediately joined hands as we had before, and waited for the trance to come. Nothing happened . . . only time crawled slowly by. Impatiently we tried to figure out what was different from before. That time, everyone in the class had been considered a suspect, and everyone's nerves had been about to snap. Anger—that's what was missing now! Far from being angry, we were almost jumping for joy.

So we started doing our best to get angry. People are pretty irresponsible critters. As we shouted back and forth about what that creep had done to our teacher, we really did begin to get angry. After twenty minutes or so, we were in a rage.

And then we went into a trance.

The vision we saw was not clear, but it seemed to be a doll of some kind. Comparing notes afterwards, Yuri and I finally agreed it was a doll of a dark-faced youth wearing a wide-brimmed hat. We promptly drew a picture of it.

The next day came. We showed the picture to our classmates. Everyone laughed at the awful drawing, but there was one boy

whose face went stiff. He said he knew an aircar that had a doll like that hanging from a hook on its dashboard. Everyone—even ourselves—was astonished. But when we investigated, it turned out he was right.

The criminal was arrested the next afternoon.

When Dr. Chiban heard the story, he called us over to the hospital. We explained in detail what had happened, and he input it into a computer.

That computer was linked to the WWWA's information network.

Two years later the WWWA scout came to see us. There had been no other opportunities to use our clairvoyance since then, and we had been on the verge of forgetting about it ourselves.

o o o

"Are you all right?"

A voice suddenly rang out, and we shivered in surprise. Looking around, we found Merutonan standing beside us with a worried look on his face.

"What happened, for God's sake?" he asked again.

We quickly told him about our ability.

"The pair of you are an esper team?"

Merutonan kept on shaking his head, whether in astonishment or admiration it was hard to say.

"We were given really rigorous training by the WWWA," I added, lowering my voice. "But even with the two of us together, we still can't see very much. Instead of clear vision, it's more like hazy . . . no, muddy vision."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We just get a fragment of a hint. It would be wonderful if we got a clear image, but no such luck . . ."

"Aha. I see," said Merutonan with an ambiguous laugh. "And what kind of image did you see just now?"

"That's it!" I cried, turning up my volume control. "Yuri, what do you think that was?"

"That thing?" said Yuri, tilting her head slightly. "Could it have been a cross mark?"

"Are you kidding? One arm was longer than the other."

"Then a real cross!"

"A . . . cross?" It was my turn to tilt my head. "Now that you mention it, it could have been a cross . . ."

"You saw something else, too, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "But I don't have the slightest idea what that could have been!"

"What kind of image was it?" asked Merutonan, his curiosity piqued.

"It was like . . . this."

I sketched a drawing on the charred ash. It showed a broad line, chopped up into many pieces.

"But— But this is a . . .!"

Merutonan looked at the drawing and knotted his eyebrows.

"Does it remind you of something?" I asked him, more than half skeptical myself.

"Uh-oh!"

This time it was Yuri.

"What is it?!"

"We're surrounded!"

Yuri was in a crouch, vigilantly scanning our surroundings. I followed her example. Along the rim of the crater I could make out a number of human shapes. There seemed to be about ten of them.

"Do you know who they are?" I asked Merutonan.

"No," he shook his head. "But whoever they are, no suspicious characters are supposed to be allowed onto Gravas Heavy Industries property!"

"That's a lot of bull when reality's up there staring us in the face," I snapped.

"True," Merutonan assented readily. He pulled something from his pocket.

"Please use this," he said. "There's been such a rash of terrorism lately that even I keep one on me."

What he handed over was a large ray gun. This model packed quite a punch.

"This'll be a big help," I said. "But what about you?"

Merutonan shrugged.

"I don't know how to use it, anyway."

Keeping low, the ten men edged closer. We flung ourselves belly-down on the blackened earth, and tracked their movements.

"Looks like they only have ray guns," said Yuri.

"How stingy of them," I complained. "If they'd used a helicopter it would have made a better picture."

"With all the defense systems Gravas has here, they probably couldn't risk anything that fancy."

"So we're in a blind spot left by the fire."

"Fraid so."

The men were now within a hundred meters of us. We could see them clearly. They wore jet-black space jackets, and their heads were covered with what looked like helmets. And of course, without exception they all held ray guns.

"What shall we do?" asked Merutonan timidly.

"We fight, obviously!"

"But there are too many of them."

"We have the Bloody Card," I said, turning to Yuri. "Yuri, show the Bloody Card to Mr. Merutonan."

"Okay!"

Yuri held up the card she was clutching in her right hand.

The Bloody Card is literally that, a card no bigger than the ones you use to play cards. It's made of Tegnoid sheet metal, and all its edges are razor sharp. When you throw it, it can easily stay airborne for two hours on ion drive, and can be freely controlled by a handheld transmitter.

"Above all, it's a great cutter," I said. "It can slice through two millimeters of KZ alloy like butter."

"Huh . . ." Merutonan could do nothing but gasp. I continued.

"That's why it's called the Bloody Card. Do you get my meaning now?"

"Huh . . ."

"With this and your ray gun, it shouldn't take us more than five minutes to polish off all ten of them."

"Here they come!" cried Yuri.

I broke off my explanation, and looked around. All ten men were charging toward us, ray guns at ready.

"Throw it!"

Even as I shouted, the Bloody Card flew from Yuri's hand.

Leaving a faint silver trail, it arced through the air. The enemy didn't even notice its rapid movement.

"Aaargh!"

"Aiieee!"

There were horrified screams, followed by fountains of red blood spurting up to stain the blue sky.

Instantly three men tumbled over, lifeless.

For a moment the others were frozen in their tracks. It was my turn.

Popping up, I fired off my ray gun.

I drilled two of them through the chest, flinging myself back down.

Countless rays of light sliced through the space I'd just occupied. Five to go.

Three of the five fell, fresh prey to the Bloody Card. In seconds the enemy had been reduced to two. But as their ability to escape unharmed so far had shown, the last two were pros. Moving far more nimbly than I had expected, they suddenly rose up right in front of us.

Laser beams leaped from the guns in their hands. Yuri and I rolled out of the way.

"Eeek!"

It was Merutonan's voice. I saw him writhe in pain, clutching his shins. He must have been grazed by a laser beam. I ground my teeth and leaped to the attack. First I gunned down one. Then I spun around to take on the last guy—but he had already been cut completely in two by the Bloody Card.

The Bloody Card, true to its name, returned to Yuri's hand smeared a bright red. I ran to Merutonan's side. Only two minutes and forty-six seconds had elapsed from the start of the fight.

"Oh! Oh God! I'm finished!"

Merutonan was going a bit overboard. As far as I could see, it was only a scratch. I smiled wryly and peered into his face. I was about to rib him a little when I was stopped by a sudden thought.

"Merutonan," I rasped. "What did you just say?"

"I'm done for!"

"No, not that! Before that!"

"Oh, oh God!" repeated Merutonan dumbly.

"That's it!"

I sprang to my feet, Merutonan's injury completely forgotten.

"Yuri!" I yelled. "That's it!"

"What's wrong with you?"

"The cross!" I shouted. "That's the Bible Dr. Angaron left behind!"

"Ah!" Yuri's expression lit up. "So that's it..."

"Now I understand."

An excited voice rang out behind us. It was the same Merutonan who had been wailing just seconds before. From his voice it would seem his wound had vanished.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The other image!" said Merutonan. "It's a bar code."

"A bar code?"

"It looks like just a broken line, but when you scan it optically, it's a signal for carrying coded information."

"Is there something like that in Dr. Angaron's Bible?"

"No," said Merutonan. "We checked, but there was nothing written in it."

"Then in that case..."

"But we didn't consider invisible ink," Merutonan concluded. "There are certain kinds of magnetic ink that can be read only by computer."

"So there's a chance?"

"Probably, if your clairvoyance is on target."

"Where's the Bible?"

"It's being kept at headquarters."

"Then let's go! Right now!"

Yuri and I lent Merutonan our shoulders. Already showing some middle-aged paunch, the executive was simply too heavy for words. Huffing and puffing, we carried him to the aircar.

I got into the driver's seat, and flew us back to the headquarters building at lunatic speed. We only crashed into the woods twice along the way.

chapter 5

get in our way and you get it!

We waited in the same old reception room on the forty-eighth floor of Gravas Heavy Industries headquarters.

After a few minutes the door burst open, and Merutonan rushed in with a black Bible clutched to his chest. The door immediately sealed shut.

"You're going to do it here?" asked Yuri, her eyes widening.

"All the equipment's here," Merutonan explained rapidly. "Besides, there's no safer place on Dangle."

"I understand that, but how are you going to do it?" This time it was my turn to ask.

"Just please keep quiet and watch," said Merutonan. With a flourish he touched the switch keys on the edge of the table.

There was a low, heavy rumble. Startled, I darted my eyes around the room.

With a deep growl, the whole wall at the far end of the reception room was being swallowed up by the floor. Beyond it stood a huge

control panel buried under a dazzling array of meters, screens, and indicator lamps. A-ha, so that's how this place is really set up!

The wall disappeared completely into the floor, revealing the console in its entirety.

"Now then . . ."

Bible in hand, Merutonan went over to the control panel. He nimbly tapped a single switch. In front of him, a fifty-square-centimeter panel suddenly fell open with a hiss as air dampers absorbed the shock. A mouth gaped open in its place.

"The idea is that we place the Bible in here," Merutonan said. "We can have it analyzed whichever way we wish, and the results will show up on the screen."

With that, he dumped the Bible into the open hole with no more ado than if he'd been tossing garbage into a dustbin. The mouth snapped shut.

Indicator lamps began blinking wildly. The LED displays of the meters flicked back and forth.

Suddenly fine print and code numbers began to flit across the biggest of the screens, easily measuring 1.5 meters high and two meters across.

"Hmm," growled Merutonan as he ran his eyes over the output. Now and then he gave a sharp nod of his head.

"It's there!" he cried jubilantly. "Just as we thought, it's in magnetic ink. It's written on the margin of page twenty-four."

"Page twenty-four," I murmured. "He took that from Lab A-24."

That's how it must have been, I thought. Dr. Angaron had thrown away his life and destroyed Lab A-24 just to make sure

someone read this message. Of course, there must have been other reasons as well for blowing up the lab. But the ultimate reason, beyond a doubt, was to ensure that this message got read. What could it be, this message that had been delivered at such a price?

Striving to contain my overwhelming curiosity, I waited for Merutonnan to read the decoded message out loud.

As Merutonnan rapidly scanned the characters printing out on the screen, his whole body went rigid. He didn't move a muscle. Only his lips trembled violently. He couldn't say a word.

Finally he spoke, shakily, as if he clawed each word from his throat.

"Wh-what a horrendous thing . . ."

Unable to bear it any longer, I harshly prodded him to go on.

"Yes," he said hollowly. "It reads, ' . . . I, Angaron, sacrifice my life to leave this warning to all mankind. At this very instant a dastardly plot is unfolding under the direction of Gravas Heavy Industry scientist Dr. Teppeus, a plot that threatens the very peace of the galaxy. I was threatened into cooperating against my will. In order to atone for this crime, I lay down my life to write this message. God, grant mercy and strength to this your child . . . ' The end. That's all there is."

Merutonnan stopped reading. The room was plunged into silence. For a few seconds, none of us could find our voices.

"Teppeus!"

Suddenly filled with a burning rage, I spat out the words.

"That crook! Trying to pass it off as an accident!"

"He should be arrested immediately!" cried Yuri.

You said it, Yuri!



Merutonan's hands moved blindly across the control panel. A man appeared on a small screen on the left. He wore a guardman's hat.

"Get me Security Force Commander Taylor!" snapped Merutonan. His voice had gone hard. Another man appeared on the screen.

"Taylor here."

"Where's Dr. Teppeus?"

The answer bounced right back.

"He and eleven researchers took off about half an hour ago in the shuttle for research station Vulcan."

"What!"

Merutonan's face went white.

"He got away!" cried Yuri. "He must have learned that we wiped out the gang that attacked us."

It had to be that.

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" asked Taylor. The face in the screen looked bewildered.

"You will wait for further orders!" snapped Merutonan, his voice turning even harsher. "For now, enter Class-A alert status!"

"Yes, sir!"

Taylor's face tensed. He broke the connection.

"Loan us an aircar!" I demanded behind Merutonan's back.

"What?"

Merutonan swung to face us.

"Loan us an aircar! We'll go to Vulcan in *Lovely Angel*."

"You can't do that!" he cried in dismay. "It's utterly reckless!"

"To a WWWW Trouble Consultant," I retorted, brushing his

words aside, "recklessness is a way of life."

Merutonan muttered and creased his brow.

"Hurry up! We don't have much time!"

"I guess it can't be helped," he murmured. He looked up and pulled a key from his pocket. "But I'm still going to call out the police. In this situation—"

"Do as you please!"

I snatched the key from his hand. Yuri and I ran for the door.

"Let me say just one more thing!"

Merutonan's voice chased after us.

"Please drive better than you did the last time!"

Who asked for your advice?

After flubbing three passes and forcing four other aircraft to crash, I finally brought us skidding through the gates of Kurutomi Space Port. Oddly enough, our own aircar was unscathed. Merutonan couldn't complain about that.

Running through the lobby, we dashed into an elevator and leaped off again at the berth where *Lovely Angel* awaited us. The sun had long since set, and the spaceport was flooded with blinding artificial light. Bathed on all sides by dozens of beams of white light, *Lovely Angel*'s elegant scarlet hull gleamed palely against the dark of space.

Eighty meters in length, eighteen meters across at her widest point. Take a long, sharply pointed artillery shell, stretch it out even more, nip in the waist, and add four rocket nozzles and four fins, alternating two large and two thin, to the stern. That's a general description of *Lovely Angel*. Of course, she's really formed of far more subtle curves than that.

No sooner had we gotten aboard than Mugi came out to greet us. He must have been overjoyed to see us. He bounded all over the place without a care, whining incessantly. Thank you, Mugi, for a hard half-day minding the store. But there's no time to play with you right now. Heartlessly pushing him aside, we hurried to the cockpit.

Yuri sat herself down in the pilot's seat, I took the co-pilot's, and we blasted off. *Lovely Angel* ripped howling through the atmosphere, dancing upward toward the distant heights of space.

After inserting *Lovely Angel* into rough orbit around Dangle, we got coordinates for Vulcan from the space port control tower and modified our trajectory. By chance, the flight controller who appeared on my screen just happened to be the same little gentleman as before. This time, though, I had too much on my mind to be a tease.

Vulcan was an immense, T-shaped space station. Its central axis was a cylinder three thousand meters long and five hundred meters across. It was enormous, all the more so for just a research station. In fact, it fell just a little short of the largest class of military space stations. If the whole thing was under enemy control, it would be all but impossible to capture it short of calling in a major battle group of the United Galactica Space Force.

Lovely Angel entered an orbit that would intersect with Vulcan in 3,420 seconds.

"It certainly is a tough nut to crack," said Yuri suddenly. "Do you see any chance of success?"

To tell the truth, I saw none at all. My pride wasn't about to let me tell Yuri that, though.

"There is one way," I said nonchalantly. "We call them, ask for landing clearance, and dock."

"Yikes!" Yuri made a show of astonishment. "Why don't you go take a spacewalk in the nude, now?"

"Lay off!"

"Do you seriously mean to try that?"

"Sure, I'm serious."

"Well, can't be helped," she said with a shrug of her shoulders. "It's not such an absolutely wacko idea. A frontal attack might actually work better than you'd think."

"Right! Absolutely right!"

I wiped an imaginary brow in relief at having fooled her so well, and nodded extravagantly.

The reply from Vulcan was "Cleared for docking." Maybe it was surprising, maybe it wasn't. In any case, there wasn't anything we could do from the outside to such an awesome station. We had to get inside somehow. If our hosts were willing to let us in, that was just jim-dandy.

"The question is, how do we get through the airlock?" said Yuri. That was an obvious enough question.

"They'll probably be waiting for us . . ."

That, too, was obvious. At first I'd thought Vulcan might only be a temporary refuge for Dr. Tepeus. But that hardly seemed likely now. No doubt Vulcan was itself the main stronghold of the "dastardly plot threatening the peace of the entire galaxy," that Dr. Angaron had warned of in his message. With a few modifications, a space station that size could quickly be turned into a fortress.

"One thousand kilometers to Vulcan!" said Yuri, beginning a

countdown. There was barely any time left before we docked.

"There's nothing for it but to make as big a splash as we can," I said. "We'd better wear spacesuits."

We pulled transparent metallite alloy spacesuits on over our regular clothes. When stretched very thin, metallite alloy is supple but still extremely tough and remarkably light. A direct hit may be a different matter, but you can count on it to stand up well to weak energy beams.

For weapons we chose heatguns. Set a heatgun on scatter, and you can put up a good fight against a numerically far superior foe.

Vulcan loomed before us.

The station sent us a stream of docking instructions. Yuri's hands were full just steering the ship, so I took over the data processing.

An expanse of Vulcan's outer plates split open, and a mooring connector slowly stretched out toward us. Once we aligned *Lovely Angel's* vector with the dock's and joined her hatch to the connector, the docking would be complete.

Yuri skillfully fired the dozens of altitude control jets to inch *Lovely Angel* closer to Vulcan. Our scanners converted our relative positions into a simulated wire image and projected it on the main screen.

One meter to go . . . fifty centimeters . . . ten centimeters . . . one centimeter.

A light shock rippled through the cockpit floor. It was gone in an instant to be followed by an almost painful silence.

"Whew," sighed Yuri.

"We're finally here," I said.

"Shall we go?"

Yuri picked up her spacesuit helmet and put it on. Her long black hair was already bunched up under a white cap. Of course, my own red hair was, too.

We took the elevator to the lower deck, and stepped into the airlock.

Beyond the hatch gleaming dully silver, at the end of the airlock was enemy territory. We checked the heatguns we clutched in our right hands. Their energy tubes were indeed brand new, the seals freshly cut.

The hatch slid open.

The thought flickered across my mind that it was just like the start of a blood-and-thunder fight scene in the movies.

Heatguns at ready, we leaped through the hatch. We bounded down the cylindrical connector tube. Inside the tube there was none of the 0.2G artificial gravity usually maintained in the floors of spaceships and space stations.

In a flash we'd reached the space station hatch. It opened with perfect timing.

We were inside Vulcan.

From the airlock we entered a passageway. We carefully scanned the surroundings. There was no one to be seen. There was no doubt that we were under surveillance, however. Otherwise the hatches shouldn't have opened as conveniently as they had.

The passageway stretched away to our right and left. Flattening ourselves against the wall, we advanced to the left. We were head-

ing for Vulcan's main control room. Thanks to the data the Gravas Foundation had relayed to us via Kurutomi Space Port, we were thoroughly versed in the space station's layout.

As might be expected, Vulcan's crew had directed us to the mooring connector furthest from the control room. It seemed a ridiculously long way to go, but no matter which way we went we couldn't get lost.

We'd gone some thirty meters beyond the airlock. The passageway was still devoid of life. With the walls themselves giving off light and the passageway stretching ahead of us as straight as an arrow, we could see perfectly. But there were literally countless intersecting corridors. We couldn't let down our guard for an instant.

"Look out!"

Yuri's shout reached me through my helmet's communications set. When I spun around, I saw partitions slamming shut down the length of the passageway. They were emergency barriers for isolating damaged sections of the station in an accident.

"Blast!"

With a click of my tongue, I swung back around, just in time to see the barrier in front of us start to close. The enemy meant to pen us in! I raised my heatgun and pulled the trigger.

An orange beam of heat spewed out and roasted the wall bright red. The panel lights went off. The wall itself began to melt and run. Then it swelled out into a large bubble.

The partition slid toward it.

An abnormal vibration echoed down the corridor. The barrier had crashed into the bulge.

Yuri and I rolled through the open gap between the partition and the floor, and emerged at the mouth of a corridor running off to the right. We slid nonstop into its shelter.

The passageway was much like the one before, although perhaps a little narrower. I flattened my body against the wall, and lowered myself into a crouch. Yuri followed suit on the other side.

"They want to take us alive," I said.

"That's why nobody's shown their face around here."

"At this rate, they'll corner us sooner or later. It's no good using the corridors."

"Well, if we don't use the corridors, how are we going to get anywhere?" Yuri demanded. She obviously thought I was talking nonsense.

In reply, I silently pointed at the wall ahead of us on our left.

"So what about it?" she asked harshly. She still couldn't get the point. I helped her out.

"If the Gravas Foundation's info is correct," I explained, "the inside of that wall is hollow. It's part of the space station's skeleton. The cavities are all tangled together, and connect to anywhere and everywhere in Vulcan."

"So you're suggesting we make a hole there and get inside?"

"Bingo! Tam-ta-da-daaa!"

"That's a good idea," said Yuri brightly. "I'll blast it open with my heatgun."

No sooner had she spoken than she trotted forward. Coming to the place I'd indicated, she carelessly raised her heatgun and started blazing away. I ran after her and helped fry the wall.

It melted before our eyes, leaving a hole two meters in diameter. Just at that moment, the thud of running feet reached us through the floor.

"They're coming!"

"They panicked when they saw what we were up to," I said, urging Yuri on. "Go on ahead. I'll join you after I clean up here."

"Okay!"

Yuri leaped through the hole. I stood in front of it, waiting for the enemy to reach the corridor.

Seven burly men in blue space jackets dashed around the corner, ray guns in hand. I instantly sprayed them with the beams from my heatgun. The first three were instantly wrapped in flames and crashed to the floor, twisting and writhing.

Take that! No one makes light of me!

Dismayed, the remaining four men retreated to the corridor they'd come from. Sticking their arms around the corner, they zapped away with their ray guns. Bad aim and my metallite alloy spacesuit saved me from harm. But at this rate, the odds could only worsen against me. I flung myself into the hole, keeping a hand on the ragged edge where the molten wall material had congealed. I was deliberately luring them on.

Just as I figured, they fell for it. They still thought we were just a couple of little girls.

When they'd come about ten steps closer, I leaned back out of the hole and let them have it with my heatgun. Transformed into balls of flame, the four men bounced against the walls and tumbled to the floor. Four-in-one!

I spun around and darted through the hole.

There was almost no gravity inside the wall cavity. That we felt any at all was probably due to spill-over from the artificial gravity in the corridor. It was the same with the light. The walls seemed to glow on the inside as well, however faintly. It wasn't hard to see. Using the lack of gravity as a boost, I hurried forward, skipping from one skeleton to another.

"This way Kei," Yuri called.

I soon caught up with her guided by her voice coming through my communication set.

"Looks like you took care of them just fine," said Yuri.

"Natch!"

Oops! Boasting again.

It took us quite a while, but there was no more interference until we reached our destination. I felt a bit let down.

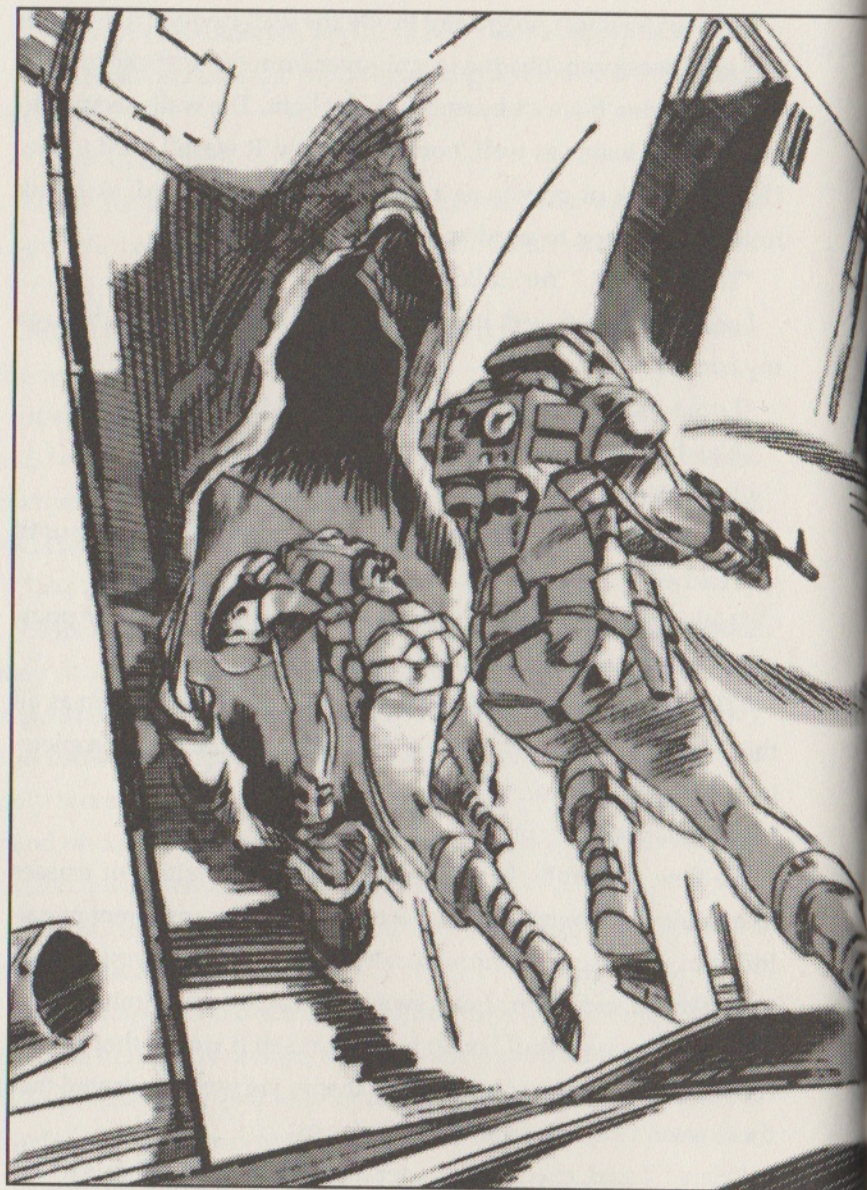
"Nobody's even trying to chase us," complained Yuri. Apparently she felt the same way.

"That's asking a lot of them when the way's as mixed up as all this," I said. "Anyone who did try to follow us could get completely lost if he wasn't careful."

"I guess you're right."

We flew gracefully between the complicated lattice of trusses like a pair of nymphs. Add our sexy outfits and transparent metallite alloy spacesuits to our naturally good looks, and you can see what I mean, can't you? I was swept with an overwhelming confidence in how beautiful I must look. That's it! It wasn't that we felt things were going too easily. The fact was, we were frustrated that there wasn't anyone around to admire us.

"Here," I said, checking a meter on my left wrist. "This is it."



Yuri floated over to join me.

"This is where we go in?"

"Sure is," I replied. "This should be the wall of the electric power room, a level above the main control room."

"So directly underneath us is . . ."

"The main control room."

"And if this is their electric power room, there must be all kinds of fun things we can do there!"

"You said it!" I agreed gleefully.

"Well then, shall we get busy and make us a little hole?"

Yuri pointed her heatgun at the wall.

"We've got to hurry. There isn't much time."

I also took aim.

Flame gushed from our two heatguns.

The wall glowed red hot, melted, and fell away. We could feel the air swirling out of the room. We waited for it to subside, then ducked through the hole.

Inside it was pitch-black.

For a moment I had a sinking feeling.

And suddenly lightning raced up and down and back and forth through the room!

In a twinkling the space around us was filled with a thousand million sparks.

"Eeeek!"

My body was enveloped in pain. It felt like I was being torn to pieces. The depths of my brain went numb, my arms and legs went rigid. I was in agony. I was being shredded from the inside

out. I opened my eyes and tried to understand what was happening to me, but I no longer had the strength.

"Yuri!"

The scream seemed to reach my lips, but no sound came out. The sparks multiplied. I could see a furious flashing through my eyelids.

An electrical discharge net! They'd set a trap for us.

Even as the thought reached my brain, something snapped.

My mind went blank.

chapter 6

nobody makes fools of us

When I came to, I wasn't wearing a spacesuit.

Of course, those clothes of mine were still okay. No one can strip off clothing covered up with reinforced polymer.

Yuri regained consciousness at almost the same instant. She sat bolt upright.

"Where am I?"

"Somewhere on Vulcan, of course!" I threw back at her. Our hands were handcuffed behind our backs. We'd walked right up onto the scaffold and let ourselves be caught there.

"What a dreary room."

Yuri was still fretting about the room. Oh, for sure, it was a boring room. It was just a square box with gray plastic paneling. A nothing room. But who cared about that! There was a mountain of more important things to be thinking about. You idiot, Yuri!

There was a sharp metallic sound.

Reflexively we searched for the source.

It was the door opening.

A young man in a blue space jacket stood in the entrance. He held a ray gun at ready in his right hand.

"You two," he said. "Come on out of there."

We followed his orders. Yuri was almost gleeful. As far as she was concerned, no fate that awaited us could possibly be worse than being locked up in a room lacking even a mirror.

Three more men were waiting in the corridor. I'd been thinking that we could kick down one guy. That was an idea that didn't last long.

Surrounded by the four men (how joyous an occasion if they'd all been serving me!), we were led to a magnificent portal.

It split open to the right and left.

The first thing to catch my eye was an enormous screen easily fifteen meters across. Next, the control panels arrayed beneath it, as colorful as an obi. Then the dozens of people sitting facing the consoles, with robots moving busily about among them. Everything leaped into sight at once.

It was the main control room.

"So, we meet again."

A voice suddenly echoed down from on high.

Recognizing it, I twisted my neck and looked overhead. There was a seat attached to the end of a crane. In the seat sat a man.

The seat descended.

The man sitting in it was Dr. Tepeus.

"I'm afraid I was rather rude at our last meeting," he said. His

voice sounded far more relaxed than when we had first met. His forbidding face also struck me as more at ease. "Given the circumstances, I had no choice but to adopt that attitude."

"I quite understand," I said with deliberate calm.

"The reason I've called you here today," he continued briskly, "was to show you something you might find interesting."

"Like what?"

"Look at the main screen," he ordered with a jerk of his chin.

"Eek!"

Yuri and I shrieked in unison.

The scene unfolding on the screen was a battle between space station Vulcan and scores of spaceships.

"Merutonon must have notified the police," said the scientist airily. "They've been turning out in droves."

He let out a long, dry laugh. There was a ring to it that made my blood run cold. For a moment I'd glimpsed the man's ravaged soul.

"However, the situation is as you can see . . . Dirty Pair. No doubt you can tell quite well for yourselves who has the advantage."

It was as Teppeus said. There was a clear gap between the attackers and the defenders. The Dangle Police Force was counting on numbers, but it was clearly being forced into an unfavorable development.

With a 150 meter-class destroyer forming the main axis of the assault, the police were tenaciously pressing forward in wave after wave. But the attacks were little more than show, and were failing to inflict the slightest damage on their foe. On the contrary, every time they closed on Vulcan they were mercilessly battered by the laser and heat cannons of the station's antiaircraft flak. The

police forces dwindled ship by ship.

No matter what, it was a serious mistake to try to take Vulcan from the outside with such a tiny fleet. If they kept it up, Dangle's police force would be wiped out before many more minutes had passed.

"Commander!"

One of the men at the control panels called Dr. Teppeus.

"There's a message coming in from the Dangle Police Force. What shall I do with it?"

"Maybe they're ready to surrender," grinned Teppeus. "It's still a little early for that, though. Good enough. Feed the visual channel into the main screen."

The image on the main screen changed.

Again Yuri and I cried out together. The face on the screen was none other than that unforgettable, that hateful, that wonderfully handsome Inspector Bayleaf.

"Dr. Teppeus!"

An absurdly immense Bayleaf spoke in a ringing voice. To have such an incredible hunk enlarged to such an incredible size—wow! Breathtaking was the only word for it. I loathed him, and at the same time was swept off my feet.

"This is Inspector Bayleaf of the Dangle Police Force. We have Vulcan surrounded by more than fifty ships of our force. You have no hope of victory. To continue this fight is meaningless. We demand your immediate and unconditional surrender."

I didn't believe for an instant that Bayleaf was the kind of man to misread the way the battle was going. Doubtless he was taking a giant gamble. One he'd decided to risk exactly because things

were going so badly against his own side. Even so, his surrender demand was simply too preposterous.

Before Bayleaf had even finished speaking, Teppeus doubled over in a fit of laughter.

"Turn it off," he gasped, laughing so hard he could barely speak.

The main screen switched back to the battle between Vulcan and the spaceships. Yuri wriggled and whined that it was a shame Mr. Handsome had gone away. Twit!

"Dr. Teppeus," I said in a voice that sounded harsh even to me, "do you really think you should be laughing?"

"What do you mean?" returned Teppeus, his voice brimming with confidence. "Don't tell me you believed that nonsense Bayleaf was spouting?"

"It's not that," I said. "I just thought I should warn you that, even if you do repulse the police, the United Galactica Space Force will be here before much longer."

"Oh," he said with a bit of a swagger. "Is that all?"

"Is that all!" I cried, startled by the unexpected reaction. "Vulcan can't beat the United Galactica Space Force!"

"No doubt you're right," he acknowledged. "However, by the time the Space Force gets here it will all be over. Dangle will be mine, or rather, my organization's. All the headquarters functions of Gravas Heavy Industries will be in our hands. When that happens, it will be a waste of time attacking Vulcan."

"What do you mean by that?!"

My face had gone white. Yuri, standing at my side, looked the same.

"Yes. After all, it is your fate to die once we've gotten a little

pleasure out of you," said Teppeus. A cruel grin twisted the edge of his mouth. "I might as well tell you the whole story."

And then he began to proudly recount the entire plot for us. It went like this—

Teppeus belonged to a certain criminal organization that values ties of blood above all others.

The name of that organization is Lucifer.

Lucifer had set its sights on Gravas Heavy Industries, the largest heavy industry company, and the fourth most heavily capitalized, in the Milky Way. It had schemed to take over its production headquarters, and all of Dangle with it. With Gravas Heavy Industries in its pocket, Lucifer would be able to challenge anyone in the galaxy.

The plan they had devised was utterly ruthless and inexpressibly savage. They would enshroud the entire planet of Dangle with Galcron Sigma poison gas.

Galcron Sigma paralyzes the frontal lobes of the brain. In effect, a chemical lobotomy. People contaminated with Galcron Sigma lose their will power, leaving them lethargic and unresisting.

Once Lucifer had gassed the planet, it would be child's play to take over the government and Dangle with it. All they would need to do would be to go to the president and demand that he hand it over. Neither the president, nor the citizens who would become Lucifer's slaves, would put up the slightest resistance.

Dangle and the production headquarters of Gravas Heavy Industries would become Lucifer's overnight.

"But somehow or other, miscalculations do occur," grumbled Teppeus. "In our case, it was Angaron.

"Angaron wasn't bound to Lucifer by blood. We thought we had no choice but to bend our rules and let him in if we were to complete our plans. It was a grievous error.

"That fool blew our only ground-based command center right off the face of the planet. Even worse, he left a message exposing our plot. It was serious treason deserving of death.

"But the plan has not been stymied. For our command center we were able to use Vulcan. We may no longer be able to fine-tune the volume of gas on the ground, but the plan itself can be pulled off with Vulcan alone. We can get the job done after a fashion, and take our time about clearing up any trouble spots later."

Teppeus pointed at one of the control panels.

"Look at that. You see numbers on the screen, do you not? A mere 1,442 seconds. That's how much time remains before the tanks of Galcron Sigma we have placed across Dangle are opened. Now it's 1,411 seconds. We had to accelerate our plans when you two started sniffing around, but that's the way things go."

Teppeus's long-winded tale seemed likely to drag on forever. I, however, had stopped listening. I'd already heard all that I needed to know. The key thing was that Vulcan was the only command center left. And why was that important? Why, because it meant that if we could only smash this place to pieces, the entire plot would fail. Now was the moment for action.

I signaled Yuri with my eyes. She caught on immediately. With an innocent movement, she slid around behind me.

"Yeow!"

Yuri fell down with a scream. Every eye in the control room swung in our direction. Even Teppeus stopped talking, and turned

his keen eyes upon us.

"Who do you think you're kicking, you stupid fool!" I shrieked. "Why don't you watch where you put your stupid feet!"

I squatted down and grabbed Yuri's shoulder with my hands, still locked behind me in magnetic handcuffs. Pretending to be helped to her feet, Yuri nonchalantly stretched out her neck and bit the ring on my right ring finger so loudly you could hear the click.

She struggled to her feet.

"Do it again and see if I help you!" I shouted. By now, though, nobody was watching us anymore.

We'd done everything that we could do. There was nothing left now but to wait.

But the waiting was agony. On the main screen the police ships were being swatted down one by one. And all the while the numbers on the console counted down ceaselessly, remorselessly toward zero hour for Lucifer's plot.

It was intolerable. The ace up our sleeve still showed no signs of moving.

Just 410 seconds to go. Just four hundred seconds to go. Just—

The door suddenly burst open. And from beyond it, a bloodcurdling scream, mixed with a familiar roar.

"He's here!" cried Yuri, her face lighting up.

Shrieking and wailing, a knot of blood-smeared men tumbled into the control room.

"Wh-what is this?!"

Teppeus's face twitched with surprise. Take that, buddy! Shouting and screaming, the wall of people around the door broke part. They poured like an avalanche toward the far wall.

They were fleeing in terror.

From out of their midst, an immense black shadow danced into the air.

A cat-like body with thick feelers extending from its shoulders like whips. Hairlike tendrils in place of ears.

"Mugi!"

We called him to us. Mugi slaughtered the dozen men between us in a festival of blood, and bounded to our side

"Mugi! Release our handcuffs!"

No sooner had I spoken than the handcuffs clicked open. To Mugi, who was able to manipulate electromagnetic waves and electric currents at will, releasing magnetic handcuffs didn't require a moment's thought.

"Listen to me, Mugi," I yelled. "Tear this room apart. Whichever way you want, however much you want! Rout anyone who gets in your way! Turn this room into junk!"

Mugi spun around, and hurtled off on his mission of slaughter and destruction. His fury was horrendous, and with good reason. He still hadn't had his daily kalium capsule. No matter how much you alter them to get along with humans, at times of hunger it is harder to control them than the wildest of beasts. A blow from their front legs pulverizes stone; their sharp fangs shred through steel. Moreover, the feelers on their shoulders can handle any and every kind of weapon.

Mugi had endured.

Until he'd been summoned by the emergency signal broadcast by my ring, he had waited and waited in *Lovely Angel's* R & R room, enduring his empty stomach. No doubt he exploded into



action the moment he picked up our signal. Using all his powers to the full, he had opened the door, opened the airlock, opened the hatch, crashed through the partitions, and massacred anyone who tried to stop his advance—just to save us.

The countdown on the console had stopped at thirty-two seconds. The control room was no longer functional.

"Kei!"

Yuri ran to me with an armload of ray guns. "Dr. Teppeus is missing!"

"Blast!" I spat. "He's run away."

"There's only one exit," Yuri said, handing me two ray guns. "Let's go after him!"

"Right on!"

Leaving Mugi at his work, we vacated the control room. If we needed Mugi later, we could always call him with my ring. Until then, let him have his fun.

We spotted Teppeus as soon as we entered the corridor. It was perfectly straight, and he was clear to see. We chased after the retreating form of the professor, already scarcely larger than a bean.

It didn't take us long to figure out where he was going. He was headed for the hangar for small spaceboats. He was planning to abandon Vulcan and make his getaway. Of course, he meant to dump all his underlings, too. I guess he wasn't cut out to be a leader.

"He's going to get away!" Yuri cried. She was right. We had barely closed the distance. At this rate, he'd escape into space.

Teppeus had reached the hangar.

"Yuri!" I yelled. "Throw the Bloody Card. Make it do its thing in the hangar!"

This was what I had in mind. The Bloody Card can cut through two millimeters of KZ alloy. If we let it fly blindly around the hanger, it might just cut through enough parts of the spaceboats to leave them unusable. Not just that. If we were lucky, it might even polish off Dr. Teppeus for us.

Yuri quickly read my intentions. She took the Bloody Card from her pocket and threw it with all her strength.

It flew into the hangar just seconds after Teppeus vanished inside.

It must have been twenty or thirty seconds later, I followed them in.

Teppeus was standing ramrod straight at the far end of the vast hangar, utterly stunned. There were three spaceboats in the hangar and all of them had been mortally damaged by the Bloody Card. Teppeus had apparently tried all three. His splendid silver mane was in disarray, and his shoulders heaved with his gasping breath.

"This is your work!" he snarled when he saw me.

"You made your bed, now sleep in it!" I shot back.

I strode toward him.

"Why don't you give up now?" I said, urging him to surrender. "A real man knows when he's beaten."

Teppeus suddenly burst out laughing. His head thrown back, he roared with mirth. For a moment I thought he'd gone mad, but I was wrong. I suppose he was laughing in contempt at his own failure.

The laughter stopped abruptly.

"You little bitch!" he screamed wildly.

He flung himself at me.

I pulled the trigger.

Teppeus crumpled to the floor, shot through the chest by my ray gun.

Gasping for breath, Yuri finally caught up with me.

We returned to *Lovely Angel*. Mugi was also back, immensely satisfied, his black body stained with blood. Boy, and we call that a pet!

We didn't want to, but we contacted Inspector Bayleaf anyway and informed him that Vulcan was no longer operational. Bayleaf didn't say a word. He just snorted.

We cast off, and pulled away from the space station. It dwindled behind us.

"That was a good piece of work," I said. "They won't be able to call us the Dirty Pair now."

"I wonder."

For some reason Yuri seemed glum.

"Of course not!" I argued, my voice rising in volume. "Sure, there was a bit of a fight at the end, but the *Galapagos* was the end of it as far as civilian casualties go. That's a first for us."

"Looky!"

Yuri suddenly pointed at the main screen. It still showed Vulcan. There didn't seem to be anything wrong. Except...

"Oh no!"

My blood froze.

"It's... engines... are... firing..."

I couldn't tell which nozzles they were. But who cares about that! Some of Vulcan's altitude control rockets were still firing, and they were pushing the space station toward the planet below.

"Some idiot must have set them off by mistake."

I seemed to hear Yuri's voice wafting up from hell.

"It can't be... stopped?"

"Not likely. Not with that much mass."

"But, but it will burn up in the atmosphere, right?"

"Not likely. Not with that much mass."

"At least crash in the sea!" I shrieked wildly. "If not, at least crash somewhere where there aren't people! A desert! The savannah! The poles! You got all kinds of choices, don't you! Please! Just please don't crash anywhere inhabited!"

But...

I begged in vain.

Vulcan, with most of its mass still intact, crashed on land, smack dab in the middle of Tascopolis City on the Erukan continent.

According to eyewitness reports, an awesome mushroom cloud towered thousands of meters into the air. The damage from the shockwave extended over the whole continent. It was nearly totally destroyed.

The death toll: 1,264,328.

Once again, the name of the Dirty Pair rumbled spectacularly throughout the galaxy.

chapter 7

mix me a dirty special

"Another! Bring me another bim soda!"

I slammed the empty glass on the counter. It let off a sharp ping of protest. Damnation! It didn't break. So you think you're tough!

"Kei, stop taking it out on the glass," said Yuri. She was sitting on the stool on my right. Little Miss Prissy had spent three hours sipping away at a single Scotch and water. That was a far cry from me. I'd already knocked down four bottles of bim all by myself. A big difference. She wasn't even drunk. Shooting off her mouth like that! Only a fool goes to a bar and doesn't get drunk!

"Doesn't it bother you? Aren't you depressed? Doesn't it make you angry? Aren't you mad with rage?"

I thrust a finger at Yuri and pounded in my words. She rolled her eyes, her glass in one hand.

"Sure!" I raged, my words slurring a little. "Sure, we're WWWA Trouble Consultants. Sure, it's our duty to anticipate every kind of

contingency, and stop them before they occur! Sure, I know that!

"But that was beyond our control! So what if 1.26 million people died. It was still beyond our control! Who gives a rip about a space station crash?! It wasn't our fault! What the hell, anyone who thinks we could have kept those engines from firing in the middle of that mess must be crazy themselves!"

"Yes, Kei," agreed Yuri wearily. "I know all about it."

No good, no good. Yuri was a born dullard. I cranked up my volume another notch.

"I tell you, it's the chief's fault! Sitting back on his fanny at headquarters, not knowing the first thing about it and chewing us out! He's to blame! The central computer itself said we didn't do anything wrong. And still the chief has to go blathering on like that. It's all his fault!"

"I know, Kei, I know," said Yuri as she checked my swinging arms. "I know, so let's try to be a little quieter, okay? There're other customers, you know."

"Bartender!" I roared, ignoring her completely. "Where's my bim soda?! Hurry up and bring it here! Stop dragging your tail or I'll give you a taste of my heatgun!"

"Ye—Yes, ma'am!"

The flustered bartender passed me a glass filled to the brim with bim soda. The little stinker! What did he think he was doing, using a manipulator like that! He didn't even try to bring it to me himself. I treat you good 'cuz you're a little bit handsome, and this is what I get? Oh no you don't! I'm a customer too, you know!

"Nobody fools around with me!"

I snatched up the glass, and with a grand flourish heaved my drink at the bartender three meters away. Right on target. The bim soda hit him full in the face.

"Aiigh!"

The panicked bartender shrieked as the alcohol stung his eyes.

"Don't go putting on airs with me!" I snapped. "Hurry up and mix another. And this time bring it to me right, with your own hands! With your own hands, you hear! Try any funny business and you won't have anything left from the neck on up! And don't you forget it!"

"Y-y-yes'm."

The bartender nodded, his voice barely a whisper. He huddled at the counter and began mixing another bim soda. Better, better. If you'd done it right the first time, I wouldn't have had to get all fired up about it.

My new bim soda finally arrived. I glared at the bartender as I took it from his hand. That so terrified him he couldn't walk away again. He'd become frozen to the spot. Good. Very good. This is how it ought to be. A bim is best when you can eye a man while you're drinking it.

"Heh-heh-heh. You really do have a way about you!"

Someone suddenly spoke up on my left. It was a vacant voice, totally listless. The hand holding my glass stopped midway to my mouth. I turned my head. A man had plopped himself down on the stool on my left and was watching me. When our eyes met he clapped his hands.

"What a fine scene! Oh wonderful, just wonderful!"

His age was a stumper. I couldn't tell if he was young, or getting on. If I had to pick, I'd say young. His hair was, well, about normal. His looks were par for the course. Well, no, maybe a bit better than that. He was thin, oval-faced and his eyes drooped a little. To be more specific, he looked like a stretched-out frog. And he had an ambiguous, unidentifiable grin on his face that never seemed to change.

He gave me the creeps.

Feeling the way I did already, he was the last thing I needed to spoil my mood.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked venomously.

"Oh, sorry, sorry. Forgot to introduce myself. Me? I'm Doteoka. I'm the editor of *High Sense Magazine*."

Doteoka fished a business card from his green jacket and laid it on the counter in front of me. Sure enough. There it was in print: Yan Doteoka, editor, *High Sense Magazine*. Even so, what a vulgar name.

"So," I said, my voice still icy. "What business does editor Doteoka have with me?"

"You two are the Dirty Pair, the leading lights of the WWWA, aren't you?" rattled on Doteoka, still grinning. "Me, I'm a great fan of yours. Heh-heh-heh . . ."

"Now just hold on there." I said, fixing him with a burning glare. "What did you just call us?"

"Why, the Dirty . . ."

Doteoka got that far before catching on. His voice trailed off. "Ah, n-no, I mean, the two Lovely Angels . . ."

Fine. That's just fine. I nodded. I allowed my rock-hard expression to soften just a little. Maybe Doteoka felt relieved. In any case, he took a deep breath and hurried on.

"Now, what I'm thinking is this. In our next issue I'd like to do a special feature on the Dirty—no, no, not the Dirty, on the Lovely Angels. Hoo-hooo-hoo. Doesn't that sound interesting?"

He abruptly downed his Scotch and water in a single gulp. I blew my top. Interesting? Interesting! Why the little creep! As if things weren't bad enough already, he wants to use WWWA Trouble Consultants in a special issue of his filthy little magazine? Who do you think you're kidding, you emptyheaded idiot? Fool!

"Damn you!" I exploded in a rage, my veins standing out blue on my forehead. "What do you think the WWWA is you, you little impotent—!"

"I, imp- impotent . . . !"

That was enough to make even Doteoka peel his eyes. No doubt it was the first time he'd ever been called that by anyone (I know this may sound funny coming from my own mouth) as beautiful as I. His face went white as a sheet. Maybe by chance he really was impotent. Well, take that, buddy! What the hell, I'm drunk. Don't mind me.

"If you don't dig impotent, then pimpatent!" I shrieked meaninglessly. "Can't you see we're depressed about being chewed out by our boss? You potato head!"

"Badmouth your boss and he'll say you're acting bossy!" returned Doteoka placidly.

"Eh . . . ?"

What an atrocious pun! Yuri and I dropped dead on the spot. The creep wasn't the least bit daunted. Far from it. Knocked out for only a second, Doteoka was already babbling on again.

"You're both dressed like that, and with your lovely figures . . . heh-heh-heh. Pose nude for the color spread and our readers will just adore it."

"Babble on, idiot!" I screamed, kicking the stool and springing to my feet.

Doteoka's eyes were a study in lechery as he looked us over from head to toe, practically stroking our silver tops and hot pants with his gaze. Hey, this was no joke! The guy was a natural-born dirty old man!

"If you like nudes so much, you can try it yourself!" I shrieked in a brittle voice that reverberated throughout the bar. "Don't bother with us! Do your own striptease!"

"Oh, what a good idea!" cried Doteoka, clapping his hands.

What the devil . . . ?

"I'll strip for you! Actually, I rather go for things like that."

Upon which Doteoka hopped to his feet and started kicking off his trousers. W-wh-what is this guy? Some kind of pervert? The bartender and the other customers nearby gaped in astonishment at the editor's "performance."

"Stop it, you idiot!" I cried in a panic. "Cut it out!"

I tried to grab Doteoka to get him to stop. But somehow or other, my grab turned into a shove.

Doteoka's legs were entangled by his lowered trousers. He couldn't move. And that was when I pushed him.

Instantly the editor toppled over on the far side of his stool.

Where he landed happened to be smack dab in the middle of the table behind him. Now, this was a dingy bar in the sleaziest part of town. It was incredibly cramped, and just packed with tables. It would have been a miracle if he'd gotten as far as the floor.

"Eeee-eek."

With a suspicious little shriek, Doteoka's skinny body smashed onto the table and crushed it flat. The four men sitting around it were flung to the floor by the force of the blow, Doteoka landing on top of them. All four were hulks, ferocious men every inch the brawler. Things looked bleak for Doteoka.

"I'll teach you, you bastard!"

Just as I'd feared, the biggest one of all tossed aside the table and rose to his feet in a rage. I couldn't make out his face beneath the wide brim of the odd hat he was wearing, but I could tell from the way his whole body was shaking that he was fighting mad. It looked like Doteoka's head and body would never meet again.

I started to go to the editor's aid, when . . . Doteoka wavered to his feet, peered up at the crazed giant before him, and cried,

"Ah, what a lovely head for billiards!"

Then he popped into the air, plucked off the giant's hat, popped up one more time, and really did smash his head into the monster's face.

"Argh!"

The bearded, long-haired giant flew over backward, clutching his face. Not that it mattered or anything, but I could've sworn I'd seen him someplace before.

"I have a lot of confidence in my head," bubbled Doteoka.

The guy was a madman.

The giant's three buddies rushed the editor. He greeted them with new head attacks.

"S-stop! Please stop. This is terrible!"

The manager rushed over, called by the bartender. He was nattily dressed in a black suit. Tough-looking giants who must have been bouncers trailed in his wake.

Gonnnk!

The manager's head emitted a dull ring. Doteoka had let him have it by mistake.

The manager blacked out on the spot. The three bouncers' faces went red with fury. But just at that moment, the giant brawler who had been the first to experience Doteoka's head punch barreled straight into them. Maybe he'd been disoriented by Doteoka's head blow. Seizing the first of the bouncers, he landed a tremendous punch on the man's jaw. The bouncer, sent tumbling by the blow, bowled over another knot of customers. A second later he was paying the price, and another brawl had broken out.

It was like a contagious disease. Before anyone knew what was happening, the fighting had infected the entire bar.

"Oh!"

Yuri, who had been wordlessly licking away at her drink the whole time, suddenly chirped in surprise.

"What is it?" I asked, wheeling on her.

"I just remembered!" she said excitedly. "That hairy bruiser! That was Curly. He's on the A-class wanted list for murder!"

"Wh—!"

I was stunned. Killer Curly! Infamous for no less than eighty-four murders! Not only that, there was a one million credit price on his head. What was a guy like that doing hiding in a bar like this?!

I frantically searched for Curly's face among the frenzied mob of brawling people. When I spotted him, he was grappling ferociously with a whole pack of other men.

Now, we're not policewomen. We're WWA Trouble Consultants. But when it comes to someone on the A-class wanted list, it's our duty to arrest him regardless of our currently assigned task. But right now that was totally out of the question. We were literally surrounded by a wall of flesh. There were dozens of people between us and Curly, and there was no way we could have gotten close to him no matter how much we flailed away.

Beep beep beep . . .

"Now what!" I wailed again. "It's a call from headquarters!"

"Another case?" said Yuri peevishly. "First they chew us out, then they wear us to a rag. It isn't fair!"

The right side of the bar suddenly brightened. We could see the flicker of flames. Somebody or something must have started a fire. Curtains and part of the wall were already ablaze.

"I-it's a fire," said Yuri. The customers, the guards, and even the bartender were completely absorbed in grappling and punching each other out. No one had even noticed the flames.

"What are we to do about the call?" I asked.

"We don't have any choice, do we?" she squealed. "We go. But more than that, what do we do about the fight, and about Curly, and about the fire?"

"We report to headquarters, then," I said in a daze.

"This bar's a shambles."

"Yuri? Do you think we should go?"

"Well, I'm going. Right now! I don't know anything about this!"

As we swam through the whirlpool of fighting people we spotted Doteoka again. He caught sight of us, too, and waved as he smacked his head into the face of the customer at his side.

We finally slogged our way to the door. The screams and bel-lows and heat were horrendous. We looked back and surveyed the whole bar, but all we could make out were the fistfights closest to us. We could also just discern the flames crawling up the far wall. The fire had already spread to the ceiling. It looked bad. The bar wasn't long for this world.

For a few moments I stood there, gaping blankly at the spectacle.

"Kei, what's wrong?" asked Yuri. "The chief's waiting for us."

"Oh, yeah."

I turned and opened the door.

We slipped out, and put the bar behind us.

end

chapter 1

this stupid game blows

"Huff . . . Huff! Hu . . . Hu . . . Hu . . . Huff!"

I had turned beet red. My eyes had glossed over and my blood was pumping hard. My body was trembling all over and I felt like I would go into spasms.

"Dammit! That . . . that . . .!"

Screaming and shouting, my sweat and spit were flying in all directions. Finding strength from somewhere I let out a whine and a shriek at this machine that possessed me.

"Give it up, Kei . . ." said Yuri. "Arabel will be here any minute. If the boss finds out we are playing Game Genocide at a casino during a murder investigation, he's going to be pissed."

Getting nagged at made me snap.

"You are starting to get ME pissed!" I yelled. "There are four more bad guys, so why don't you shut your trap?!"

"But, Kei!"

"Dammit! Dammit! Crap! Dammit! You! You! This is your fault!"

The 3D display now showed three BEM ships left. The image was moving faster and faster. If I could just blast these guys with my laser, totally annihilating them, it would give me a perfect score—that is to say one hundred thousand credits would come pouring out of the machine's payout slot.

I was burning up. I wasn't going down like this. It would all be a waste. Three hours stuck on this game, I couldn't let all that effort go floating away like a bubble. I grabbed the lever and squeezed the trigger, putting all my energy into the tip of my finger.

"This one! This one! This one! DIE! Crap! You! You need to die! DIE, I say!" There was a multi-colored flash and one of the BEMs was blown to pieces. There were two ships left.

"Oh, Kei!"

I could hear Yuri's voice coming from the side.

"Knock it off! Idiot! You're not getting away!"

I threw a string of insults at the machine, focused entirely on the remaining BEMs. I fired the laser! KA-BOOM! The sound of a man-made machine exploding resonated in my soul. One more ship left!

"KEI!"

The now annoyed Yuri yelled right into my ear. I didn't know she had this level of volume in her, and being so focused on the game, my heart stopped for a second. Looks like those college choir classes were good for something. I am guessing it was about 120 decibels. An insane level.

My brain was distracted, and my ship disappeared from the display. In a flowery show, the words "GAME OVER" came onto the

display. My score was 9999 points . . . I needed just one more point! With one more point I could have been walking away with one hundred thousand credits!

"KYAAAAAA . . ."

I was crushed, and it echoed throughout the entire 2,300 square-meter Alternera-Lamier Hotel casino. All the guests of the gaming establishment froze on the spot and looked right at me. They all had a look of surprise. This is a fancy hotel full of rich handsome men, and they looked at me with a suspicious glare in their eyes.

But what good were they now? My one hundred thousand credits . . .

I turned to Yuri, burning with rage.

"Yuri . . ."

The voice trickled quietly from my mouth, and sounded more like the voice of a demon from hell.

"Wha-what is it?"

Her voice was trembling, but she was bluffing.

"Yuri . . ."

I said it one more time.

"Let-let's just stop . . ."

Beads of sweat started to form on Yuri's brow. Sprouting from her silver hot pants, her beautiful slim legs started to buckle. Even though she was smiling, her pathetic efforts to keep it together were in vain as she stood there trembling.

"Don-don't you think it's about time . . ." Yuri continued. "That's just fate. That's the way the cookie crumbles. That's why they call it gambling, right? It's probably a good time to call it quits."

"Zip it . . ."

I glared at Yuri. Her pale-as-paper skin went a shade whiter. It's like she was drained of all her blood. I took a step toward her.

"How are you going to pay me back?"

"Pay-pay you back? I didn't think that . . ." Yuri's body writhed in clear discomfort. However, my keen eye saw through her fault-free attitude, and I wasn't in a forgiving mood. "That's why I am saying you should stop . . . You know . . . You had your fun, right? At three o'clock Mr. Arabel will arrive. Being here . . ."

"Pay up!"

I put out my empty right hand.

"Hm?"

Yuri looked like a deer in headlights.

"Pay up!" I repeated. "Give me all your game chips!"

"You, you mean all of them? Are you still planning on gambling?"

Her eyes got as big as saucers. Her pupils were black like obsidian.

"Whether I plan on still playing or not, pay up!"

My tone was getting more and more harsh.

"Kei! You played two hundred games nonstop for like six hours!" Yuri blurted out frantically. "It's time to call it quits!"

"Pay up!"

"Forget it!" Yuri's cheeks got a little flushed. "You know what we are doing here on Lamier, right?!"

"Gambling!"

I didn't even have to think about my answer.

"Wha . . ."

Yuri stumbled in surprise.

"C'mon, Kei!"

Yuri was going to try and stop me, but it was too late. I had already thrown a game chip in the machine's slot, grabbed the lever, and wrapped my finger around the trigger.

SHOOSH, SHOOSH. The familiar sound of electricity humming flowed through my spine. Oooh . . . that's the sensation I needed. This is it! This is the stuff! I might even climax!

On the 3D screen in front of me a green-colored planet appeared. The ship I was operating inched closer to the planet. One by one, enemy BEMs took off from the world's surface sending pot-shots at my ship. I will fight until each one is completely obliterated. This isn't just a game, it's gambling, so there is a big element of chance involved as well, and getting a perfect score is damn near impossible. This is one of the tougher games out there. Physical strength and the ability to focus and concentrate are the key points to winning. My senses tingled as I embedded myself back into Game Genocide.

Giving up, Yuri kept quiet. That's right! Yuri sometimes knows when to keep her trap shut.

I still hadn't fully recovered from my anger, but a part of my consciousness concentrated on fighting the BEM ships. It's not like I am one to forget my mission! But we hardly ever get any time off! Heck, we're in the casino anyway, right? Who would hold it against us for having a little bit of fun?

SHOOSH, SHOOSH.

The murder case isn't going anywhere! The investigation can wait! So, some hick from Maleenay died! I'll be finished here soon! You you you! Die! DIE!

SHOOSH, SHOOSH.

A voice said, "It's a fight!"

Hey, I am just a young girl! I am only nineteen years old. And pretty cute! My red hair is a bit frizzy, but my bust is ninety-one centimeters! Waist is fifty-five centimeters! Hips are ninety-one centimeters! Forget the mission!

"Fight! Fight!" I heard the voice again.

What a pain in the butt! That Arabel! What makes an Inspector General so special? What about a fight? I am nineteen years old! A fight . . . ?

"FIGHT!"

I let out a shout in return. At that moment a loud boom thundered through the casino, my attack was thrown off course, and it was GAME OVER. I ignored it. I had enough of this. There was a fight! Somewhere someone was duking it out! Ooh, I started to get excited.

The Game Genocide machine had me under its spell, but the thing is, I am more addicted to rumbles.

"Where's the fight?" I was asking Yuri as my expression switched to a menacing scowl. She had a "this again?" look on her face.

"Over there . . ." She pointed toward the back of the casino.

I quickly turned to where she pointed. Clear in the back of the casino, near the Cesium Roulette tables a crowd was already forming. "Bring it on!" "What happened?" "Go get 'em!" "Stop them!" and the like were being shouted, and I could only catch fragments. Darn . . . it's already in full swing! I'm too late!

"Outta my way!"

In a rage I dropped my shoulders and shoved against the crowd head-first. This young beauty with a hard body in a radiant silver bra-like top and in low-rise hot pants showing my shapely hips and thigh-high silver boots was about to get mobbed by these insolent men. Move it! Outta my way!

I gave two gents elbow smashes to the ribs. Three more got kicks to the most tender of places. Six got head butts to the spine, and I slipped out to the front.

"Zing . . .!"

As I made my own sound effects, one guy fell out to the front of the crowd where I stood. He was a typical wanna-be punk type. In a gaudy shirt with a high collar and slim black leather pants that were totally out of style, how did he get into a casino this fancy? It's one thing for us, we're WWWW members, but normal people not dressed in formal attire can't get one foot in the door.

"KYAA!"

Another similar looking punk flew from out of nowhere, screaming like a lunatic. Both punks rolled head over heels, landing at my feet.

"Who are these guys?"

Heel-dragging Yuri asked from behind me, as she had just made her way through the crowd. How the hell should I know?!

The big fight going on by the king-size Cesium Roulette machine involved five people. There were four men and one woman. It seems it was originally seven combatants, but two of the men were laid out at my feet for the time being. Three of the standing men were dressed in the same garish garb as the two fallen

fighters—so it seemed to be a three-versus-two skirmish. The two were fighting as mixed doubles. The couple was pulling off moves together, and they knew what they were doing. Their combinations were second-to-none.

One of the punks slipped behind the team of two. In his right hand he grasped a thin-bladed knife. That's not fighting fair, but it didn't look like anyone was about to stop him. They were a little far off, but just as I was thinking it was time for me to jump in, the punk with the knife dove for the man. I would say the guy was twenty-three or twenty-four, and had dark, tanned skin. He was tall and had fearless, handsome good looks. Ask as many women as you like, and they would all tell you that if a guy this handsome gets killed, it's a serious blow to humanity. Was it crazy to think that if he and his girl got into a tiff, he might turn his attention my way?

"Behind you!" I yelled to him. I am not sure if Handsome heard me or not, because he did his counter-move at the same time I was yelling.

Avoiding the knife, Handsome kicked the punk in the jaw with perfect timing, sending him flying backward. Ker-shrrrk! Slammed on his ear there was a rather unpleasant crunching sound. Knocked silly, the punk was slumped over on the ground. His mouth and nose were drenched in blood.

"Son of a bitch!"

The remaining two gangster wannabes were incensed, and made a frenzied rush toward Handsome. They had completely forgotten about his female partner. That was their fatal mistake. Dressed in an eggshell-colored pantsuit, at a glance she looked



like a very graceful woman. She got down low and, extending her leg as far as she could, swept them down through their shins. With the momentum they had, it was simply perfect. They flew about a meter into the air, then landed belly down on the floor like two frogs—PLAP! They weren't knocked cold, but for the moment they were gasping like they had the wind knocked out of them. Make no mistake. These two were students of some kind of formal training.

"Pardon us! Yes, excuse us . . .!"

The polite nature of the words they were saying didn't match the volume of their loud shouts as three casino security guards busted through the crowd. "Security guard" may sounds like a respectable position, but they are really just paid muscle. These three had shifty looking mugs and were shaped like gorillas, as wide as they were tall.

The guards put out their hands to help up the fallen punks. After that they glared at the standing couple over their dark green sunglasses. In their matching black uniforms, they were more than a little intimidating.

One of the guards held an electric nightstick in his right hand and tapped it into his left. He spoke with a gruff voice.

"Looks like we have a little problem here, you starting up this sort of trouble . . ."

Handsome's cheeks went flush.

"What the hell are you saying?!" he returned. I though it was just his face, but he had a nice tenor voice, too. "Hey, these jerks just came up to us and started swingin'. If you are really security guards, isn't your job to kick out these fashionless thugs?!"

Shouts of agreement came from the crowd. Looking a little like a distant relative to a Tyrannosaurus, the security guard's eyes got very narrow. Quickly the crowd got quiet again.

"You don't need to tell us what our job is," the guard holding the electric nightstick said coolly. "I'm not worried about the circumstances. All I know is that when we came in the only trouble I saw was coming from you two. Now why don't you step over here a little closer?"

I was dumbfounded. I had never heard such nonsense before. The trashed group-of-five were the bad guys here. And they were siding with the casino dress-code breakers! Who let these punks through the door in the first place? The security guards should be apologizing to the guy and girl! To come at them with this overbearing attitude . . . He had everything completely backward.

"..."

Struck dumb by the unbelievable statements he was hearing, Handsome's face remained pale, and he was literally biting his lip.

My last ounce of patience dried up, and I snapped. But, hey . . . I am a WWWA Trouble Consultant. Isn't clearing up these kinds of situations what I do?!

Reminding myself this, that's when I stepped forward.

"Now hold on! What are you guys trying to pull?"

The shout came from right next to my ear, and I felt someone give me a little shove from the side.

It was Yuri. One moment before I had the chance, Yuri butted in.

And this is from a girl who usually looks like she wouldn't squash a flea. Look at her now! But don't you worry, I got in there, too! Nyaa!

"Those two are the victims!" Yuri said in a shrill voice. Her soprano screech might hurt your ears if you were too close. "What fight were you guys watching? You couldn't be any more wrong! Are you even qualified to be security guards?!"

At 168 centimeters tall, and packed into an 88-54-90 sized petite build, slightly smaller than I am, Yuri has flawless white skin with a slight rose-colored tint to it and her black eyes have a pretty sparkle, which brought even more attention to her impassioned rant. The three security guards couldn't suppress their surprise, and for a brief moment they were the ones dumbstruck. But soon they returned to reality and the guard holding the electric nightstick, having about forty centimeters on Yuri, peered down at her and laughed as he started to speak.

"From out of nowhere comes another know-it-all! What are you, some kind of silver-colored bunny girl?! Thinking you can come here and yell at us..."

"Shut up!"

Yuri's voice struck its target. Resounding with confidence, her retort was persuasive. When she gets like this, Yuri is scary. She can be merciless.

The grisly faced guards didn't utter a peep.

Without pausing, Yuri continued her verbal barrage.

"I am Yuri from the WWA! Codename: 'Lovely Angel.' If you have heard of me then you know you watch your mouth when talking!"

"Ohpp..."

The three security guards' eyes got big and round.

"Dir-Dirty Pair..."

"That's right..."

Finally it was my turn to pipe in. If I missed my opportunity, then I'd have to wait until the timing was right for the next chance to have my voice heard. I'd have to make up for the ground I already lost. Like a star performer on stage, I leisurely made my way forward.

"If you are looking to make friends with a Crime Trouble Consultant, I'll make time for you," I said. "We'll turn those ugly mugs of yours into ashes!"

"Er... emm..."

Cold sweat beaded on the brow of each security guard, and they were caught speechless. Their strength disappeared and their jaws were locked in fear.

"So now what're you gonna do?"

Yuri's eyes narrowed, asking the question like this was all a waste of her precious time. Her right hand rested on the grip of the ray gun hanging from her hip. She looked like she'd rather shoot than ask questions.

"We, we understand..."

The security guards stepped back, turned on their heels, and returned from the direction they had come. The beaten punks, who had by now come to their senses, followed suit. Like kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar, the punks scrambled to get away from everyone's attention, stumbling back into the crowd.

"In your face!"

I blurted coolly and gave a cute smile, then turned around elegantly. Of course, this was done in an attempt to entice Handsome. Yuri might have had the best lines, but I had the last word. I bet

that left an impression on Handsome.

"Um..."

I gracefully approached the surprised Handsome. His eyes lit up suddenly. Oh... May-maybe I really have a chance here. I felt a glimmer of hope. At that moment Handsome spoke.

"Yuri! Aren't you Yuri...?!"

"Wha—!"

I could have died, right there on the spot.

Yu-Yuri, did he say...?! What the hell is going on here?! Handsome's eyes drifted past me to land on Yuri. How cruel can you get?! Gazing at Yuri, he found my fragile weak point, and then stomped on it. Yuri stroked her long black hair with one hand and batted her eyelashes.

Seeing my shock, his tone shifted back to normal.

"Did you ferget? Ferget lil' ol' me?"

What was up with his accent?

"Yuri, c'mon rattle yer brains! It's me! Thunder!"

"... Thunder..."

Yuri's mouth was wide open, and she cautiously viewed this unbelievable turn of events.

"Are you really Thunder...?"

"Yup!" and Handsome bowed his head. "It's me, Thunder. Oh yeah, and that's Lucha."

Handsome—I mean, Thunder pointed a finger over at his pretty partner.

"Thunder! Lucha!" Yuri squealed. Who were these people, the guardian deities of Naples? While, I wasn't going to let this bizarre situation get the best of me, what Yuri said next really hit me.

"Oh... yeah... gosh, that brings back memories...! How is everyone back on Maleenay?"

"Wha, ha ha, WHA-?!"

chapter 2

murder case . . . ? nya!

"You never told me you had been to Maleenay!"

I blew up on the elevator to the thirty-ninth floor. Yuri just stared straight ahead. It was just the two of us riding up. Even when there is friction, we know we are team, now and for always.

"You're telling me you were hiding this strapping young buck this whole time? That's a little disturbing."

"But . . ."

Yuri looked like she was about to cry, and her body writhed in some psychological pain. Man, is she predictable! She plays this transparent poker hand every single time. Pull your head out, sister!

"I was in Maleenay for four years," said Yuri. "Remember, I stayed with my aunt? When I was eight years old, okay? We were just kids!"

"Hmm . . .?" Now my eyes got narrow, and I juttied out my chin. "Just kids, you say?"

"What are you trying to . . . ?" Yuri's eyes showed signs of panic. She should have had an umbrella for the complaints I was about to rain on her.

"Yuri! Every time you could have included me in the conversation, you just laughed like a little girl. 'Yuri, you have grown into a real fine woman,' 'Oh, Thunder, you—' 'You say big brother, but check out my lil' sis, Lucha's legs. She'd give you a run fer yer money!' . . . Who talks like this? . . . And what about the fact that I'm standing there next to you like an idiot. Hello?!"

"But, you see—"

"No 'buts'!"

My nostrils were flaring. Even I couldn't control my eyes rolling up into my head.

"But he's a close friend I haven't seen in seven years!" Yuri was trying to turn things around on me. "We have the freedom to talk however we want!"

"Freedom is fine. Be free!" I was down to my last nerve. "But freely using our name, and then ignoring your partner is a little heartless, don't you think? We are talking about a man here! A handsome man! And the girl he's with is his sister! I wanted to take a shot at a date, but I can't even get an introduction! Is this how partners treat each other?"

"Hmmm . . . ?"

A broad smile grew across Yuri's face. Yikes! I shrieked inside my head. A cold chill ran down my spine. I was on a roll, and then I, I spilled the beans . . .

"So the truth comes out . . ." Yuri stated with pride. Tee-hee-hee . . .

"That's what I figured, anyway . . ."

Tee-hee-hee . . .

"You really are shallow, you know . . ."

Tee-hee-hee. Isn't that going a little too far—?

"So what?!" I launched a deadly assault. "So what?! Where is the crime in checking out a delicious-looking stud?!"

"HEE ha ha ha!" Yuri was antagonizing me with her snicker. "You can say whatever you like. I've known Thunder for a long time. With Lucha, the three of us hung out together every day. You wouldn't have a chance getting Thunder! HEE ha ha . . ."

"Th, th, th . . ." I was at a loss for words. I was being trumped! I couldn't win this war of words this way! Now that it came to this . . .

"Shoo . . ."

I took a deep breath and turned to Yuri. I would need my strength to knock Yuri down, or else my reputation would be ruined (a paltry reputation, but a reputation, nonetheless). Inside that tiny elevator we glared at each other for a long moment. If I lose this single battle to Yuri, would we still be partners? The thought crossed my mind. If Yuri were to run off with some handsome thing like Thunder and leave me alone . . . well, I can't imagine an existence more miserable. Can you fathom someone choosing someone else over an Aphrodite like me?

But, right at this critical moment, we were able to escape that escalating situation.

The elevator stopped at the thirty-ninth floor.

No matter how many times you call us "Dirty Pair," even we aren't the types to get in a fight in a hotel corridor where there are people walking around.

"That was a close one!" I blurted out as I stepped out of the elevator. Obviously Yuri and I were together. After finishing our basic education at twelve and becoming a team in college, we've been together . . . seven whole years. In that time we have never spent one day apart. We never actually really get in fights.

The room we were looking for, #3907, was right near to the elevator.

We stood in front of the door and knocked. A booming voice answered. Present time: 3:18 p.m. With the fight downstairs, then our other thing, we were eighteen minutes late.

The door opened slowly. Someone seemed a little high-strung.

We entered the room. And a nice room it certainly was! Even in the famous and swanky Alternera-Lamier Hotel, this must have been one of the fancier suites, I guessed. There were three large rooms, all really spacious. The furniture was similar to our furniture up in room #4011.

"Thank you for taking the trouble . . ."

A gentleman greeted us. He was about forty-four or forty-five. He wore a snazzy brown suit and had distinctive grayish hair. Young and handsome guys like Thunder are great, but this kind of older, refined gentleman is really my type. Maybe I have been single too long . . .

"Kei, you're drooling!" Yuri whispered into my ear. Okay, I got it! . . . slurp!

"Please, come this way . . ."

He directed us to the couches and table in the next room. I sat down on the sofa, and Yuri took a seat to my side. We sunk into the soft cushions. With the table between us, the man sat across from

Yuri and me. This gentleman who sent a request to the WWWA for a Trouble Consultant (TC for short), is the United Earth Commonwealth, Lamier Resident Chief Inspector Arabel. He called the WWWA after the local police had already concluded an investigation. Indeed, he had the aura of a brilliant man.

"First of all, why don't we have something cold to drink?"

As Arabel said this he pushed some buttons on a console attached to the side of the table. I ordered iced tea. Yuri wanted iced cocoa. From the far room a one-meter-tall white box came click-clacking across the floor to us. It was one of this hotel's famous waiter robots. From the robot's stomach (not like it had a distinctive head, chest, or stomach, mind you) it pulled out a coffee, iced tea, and iced cocoa and lined up the glasses on the table in a row. Then it turned and chugged back to the far room it came from.

"Well now . . . The time has come," said Arabel. "Shall we get started?"

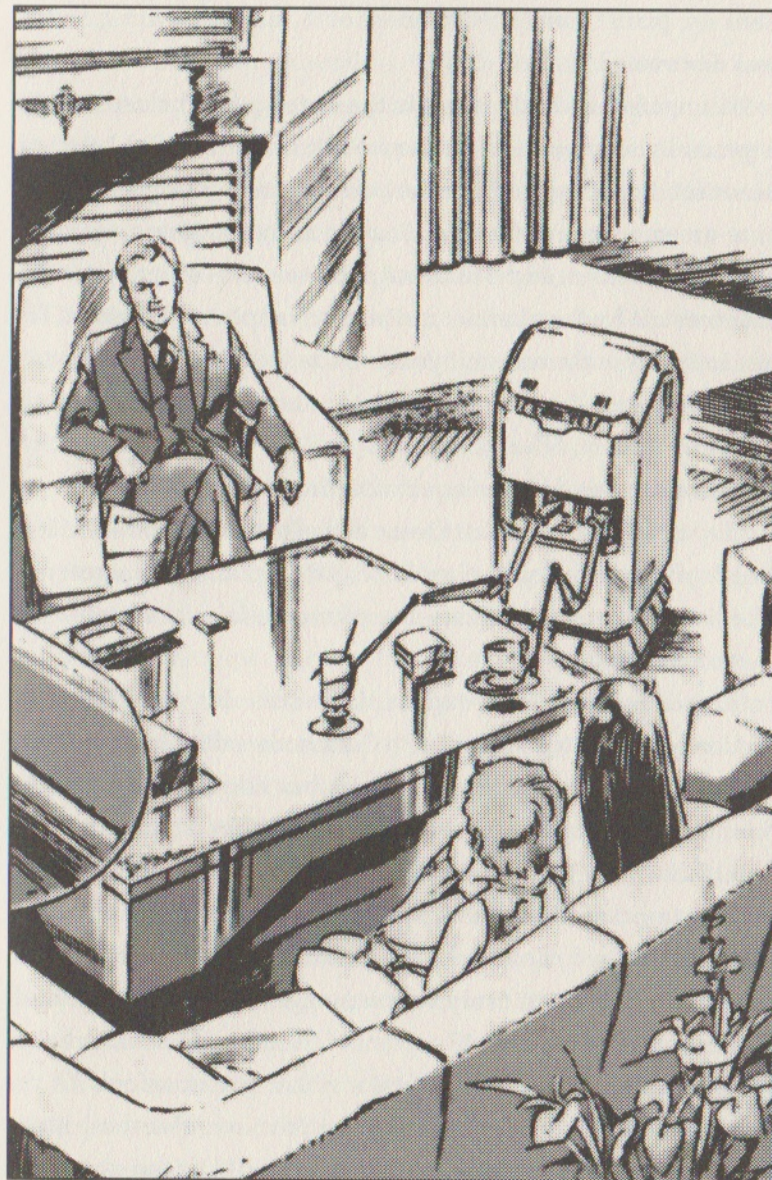
"Sure!" I nodded.

"I believe you have already had the opportunity to read the report I submitted, but if you haven't, please allow me to indulge in a run-through. With your permission, I will explain the progression of events in this case."

With this introduction, Arabel took his time and began to speak. This is what he told us.

"On the standard calendar, the events traced back to ninety-four days prior.

"Early in the morning on the day in question, at the renowned Emerald Beach, a part of the large resort area outside Topaz City



here on planet Lamier, the body of a male drowning victim was discovered.

"Lamier is the fourth planet in the Derelique star cluster, and it is generally referred to as 'the Gem of the Universe,' because it's so beautiful. In reality, from the darkness of space, one glance at the blue-green planet of Lamier, floating in nothingness against a black background, and that description seems like a grave understatement. Why does Lamier radiate such a spectacular glow? The key to that is in the ocean. If you exclude the thousands of tiny islands that exist, there really is only one big land mass you could call a continent. The actual proportions of sea to land are seventeen-to-one. Lamier's radiance comes from its ocean.

"Topaz City is in the West Ocean of that sole continent—the continent of Borohos. Population: 1,285,000. It's Lamier's largest city. The hotel we are staying at—the Alternera-Lamier Hotel—is in downtown Topaz City.

"Lamier is not an independent planet-state. It's under the jurisdiction of the United Planet Earth Commonwealth Mandate. They do have their own governing system, but no parliament, per se, has been allowed. In some ways it's like halfway a planet-state.

"Officially, they have built about fifty thousand casinos. If you include unlicensed locations, that number jumps closer to probably one hundred thousand. The amount of money each casino rakes in from tourists every year is staggering. The United Earth Commonwealth receives 40 percent of the take, and Lamier keeps the remaining 60 percent. That's a rather generous cut. To the commonwealth, Lamier is a veritable gold mine. With those kinds of numbers, it has to be valued highly. It would be the same with

any commonwealth. Within the galactic system, there are over three thousand commonwealths. Within that there are over two hundred mandated gambling planet-states, and another six hundred and forty are mandated for specific mining or other purposes. They are grouped together because casinos are seen in the same way as mineral mines, but with never-ending resources.

"We got a little sidetracked in our conversation. Let's get back to the matter at hand. Our drowning victim washed up onto the beach. The deceased was an elderly gentleman, approximately fifty-five to sixty-five years of age. There were lacerations on his shoulders and lower back, and there appeared to be bruising on the right half of his body. It didn't appear to have been a natural death. He may have fallen off a yacht, or else he might have attempted a failed escape from a plane making an emergency landing. Using analogical reasoning we could come up with a variety of possible scenarios, but we were sure of one thing: there had been some sort of accident. Naturally, the Topaz City police came up with the same conclusions.

"The elderly man's name was Bayer. He was fifty-eight years old. Elderly probably isn't the right word, as he wasn't so very old. He was from a remote region in star cluster 5052, a place called Maleenay. At the time of the accident he was probably separated from his home. When we found him he had no passport or identification on his person, but we were able to identify him from his lodging card at his hotel.

"Three days before Bayer's body was discovered he leased a rental jet and flew south, but never returned. This corresponds well with the situation. There were no witnesses, but it's not out of

the realm of possibility to think that if he crashed in the ocean it could take three days for the body to float back to Emerald Beach. That timeline fits with the direction he was seen going and the flow of the tides if he was approximately five hundred kilometers south of Topaz City.

"The Topaz City police treated this incident as an accident caused by flying error, and to process Bayer's body, authorities in Maleenay were contacted. Their response was not cooperative. Apparently Bayer was single, and had no relatives. They said it couldn't be helped. Topaz City government officials decided to bury Bayer in a public cemetery. The expenses were covered by the money Bayer had with him on Lamier. There was a bit of a fortune there. What money was left over after putting Bayer to rest went to charities, as prescribed by laws for these kinds of situations.

"Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and the case was promptly closed.

"However . . ." said Arabel. "For some reason, I just couldn't put it to rest."

"Why was that?" I asked. "Why couldn't you let it go? Did you receive an anonymous tip? Did it say that it wasn't an accident?"

"Oh, heavens no . . . !" Arabel laughed, raising his hand in the air to parry any other wild suggestions. "Chief Inspector under the United Earth Commonwealth is an ornamental title. There is no true power or authority. Is that the kind of person you would take secret information to? Even with a mandate, it's just a theory, and in the end it's the people here who have the power. For example, the tight-fisted Lamier Superintendent of Game Promotions

Standalf. With one word he can have the people all over the planet jumping."

"Waa—"

Yuri's interest was suddenly piqued. Ugh, she was real naïve sometimes. Dummy! To get all excited over a thing like that . . . Please just act normal!

"So . . ." I said to Arabel prodding him, "Why can't you tell us why you can't let the case remain closed? Don't tell us you had some hand in it, now!"

"Please, act like a professional," Arabel said, looking a little fed up. "Where would you even get that impression?"

"A ha ha! Just kidding!" I laughed, trying to ease the mood.

"The reason I can't drop this case is because after personally looking more closely into some of the details of the case, certain things simply don't add up."

Arabel still seemed a little irritated, and the volume of his voice had risen. That's not good. I guess I went a little too far.

"You said you 'personally' looked into some details? Commonwealth investigators don't have authority in criminal investigations, I thought."

Yuri suddenly inserted herself into the conversation. At times like this, it's nice having Yuri around, as she can act serious when she wants to. She only looks demure in her appearance, but in reality this kitten has claws.

"Yes, that is correct," Arabel's tone had calmed, yet his voice sounded rather grave. "It was done out of the realm of an investigator's authority. I did my checking completely on my own."

"But, why? What were you looking for?"

"To tell the truth . . ." Arabel leaned forward, "I was the one who discovered the body."

Wha—

My jaw hit the floor. Ahem, why didn't you say that in the first place, mister?! Don't make it sound like it's more than it is!

"It was when I was taking a stroll on the beach that I ran across him, and then contacted the police." Arabel's boastful story continued. "This is the first time anything like this had ever happened to me in my entire life, so I developed a special interest in the case and did some checking of things on my own. Chief investigators are known for not having a whole lot to do, so one thing I had was time. I was able to research the case rather thoroughly."

"Hmph . . ."

I listened to him a little standoffishly. What was this?! He has nothing but free time, so he decides to become an amateur gumshoe?! I am a professional at this, and I don't get near the downtime I deserve! Grrrr . . .

"And through your investigation you came to the conclusion that this was a homicide, and not an accident, correct?" Yuri asked him again. It looked like we were on the same wavelength about this story, and she spoke with a clipped tone.

"That is correct." Arabel nodded.

"And since you don't have any actual authority to conduct an investigation," I asked, "you had no one to bring your findings to, so you chose to present your mystery to the WWWA. Is this not correct?"

"Correct." Arabel nodded again.

"Shoosh . . ."

I let out a sigh. Holy smokes, to make the WWWA get all excited about a case like this . . . When I heard this was a case being requested by a United Earth Commonwealth Chief Inspector, I assumed that it would be some big important deal. Instead we get some middle-aged flatfoot's playtime leftovers. On the other hand, the party that accepted the case is the WWWA, one of the public bodies belonging to United Galactica. The WWWA isn't associated with any one planet, but was established in the year 2135 to maintain the bonds that hold the galaxy, and humanity, together by resolving trouble when it arises. This is done by finding, training, and dispatching the most gifted and talented agents to advise situations, settle disputes, and solve problems.

The officials the WWWA dispatches—Trouble Consultants, are skilled in economics, medicine, system engineering, and the like, all experts in a variety of fields. We respond to trouble through dispatch, and then go do our job. TCs are given our own exclusive ship, and have a free pass to land on or leave any planet which is part of United Galactica whenever we want. TCs have a lot of power. We have been given complete independence in our investigative authority, and we Crime Trouble Consultants have no restrictions on the arms we can carry.

Let's be clear, TCs aren't exactly military, and not exactly police. For one, every planet-state already has police and military forces, and United Galactica has a fleet of spaceships, so when interplanetary crime cases come up, they can send their United Space Force troops. United Galactica has no need to establish secondary military organizations to assist with problems.

The WWWA exists to benefit humanity. As the name says,

Welfare—"Life Prosperity" is the idea. That's why WWWA officials are called Trouble Consultants.

The WWWA is everywhere in the galaxy, and we get assignments through a variety of ways. Many of our cases come from planet-state governments. When a government has some incident that they can't handle, they call the WWWA in to take the case. We also get quite a bit of work from private sectors. Those are mostly crime or money related. A lot of times the requesting party doesn't agree with a police response or a legal decision made. In these cases, the WWWA, just like it was a government case, won't dispatch a TC immediately. First the WWWA will conduct their own investigation, collecting data from the police or courthouse as well as the requesting party. After a careful investigation into the complaint, if there is any sign of misconduct or wrongdoing, no matter how small the case, we will accept it and begin work toward resolution immediately.

Until that very moment, we thought Inspector Arabel's case was a formal government request. That was because it came from a United Earth Commonwealth high official. But, really, it was a private sector case. Regardless, we needed to check out this amateur sleuth's suspicions thoroughly. Using United Galactic's Central Computer, facts and decisions on the case would be available to us.

"The first point of suspicion I have is . . ." said Arabel, "Bayer was a tourist from Maleenay, yet he wasn't seen entering or exiting the casino once."

"Is that strange?"

Yuri cocked her head to the side.

"It is strange!" Arabel answered categorically. "Make no mis-

take, Lamier is a beautiful gem. The ocean is gorgeous, and the seaside swimming areas and facilities are sufficiently staffed. But, visitors don't only come here for the beautiful ocean. If someone from Maleenay just wanted go sightseeing and see beautiful oceans, there must be countless systems one hundred light years closer to Maleenay they could go to. He didn't likely go all this way, 4,300 light years, just to see the ocean. If he didn't come here to gamble, then what?—this is a gambling star. People come to Lamier to gamble in the casinos."

"..."

"I have been an investigator living here now for four years. In those four years I have never seen a tourist who didn't come here to gamble."

"Whoa . . ." Yuri acted shocked. She was probably trying to say that she wasn't here to gamble. Enough of this talk. I won't even bring up my own situation. There is nothing to be gained.

"But according to the evidence from the hotel porter . . ." he continued; thankfully, he didn't notice the tension between Yuri and me, "... it seems Bayer was away from the hotel the entire time he was checked in. He was registered for eleven days, but was never seen leaving. Never seen in this hotel casino, and on top of that, never seen in any other casino. Only at one of Topaz City's suburban airfields. He flew a rental jet each and every day he was here."

"..."

"I went to the airfield. And then, at their rental service, I discovered the second discrepancy," said Arabel, licking his lips.

"That was Bayer's flying skills."

"So he was a crappy flier?" I asked, trying to keep up with Arabel's dramatic storytelling pace.

"No . . ." he shook his head a little too much. We were missing the details in the theatrical retelling. "It was quite the opposite. First-time customers must do a test flight with a professional pilot. Bayer's test results showed he was a better pilot than his tester."

"Whoa!" Yuri's interest was piqued again. "And because of a flying error, supposedly he crashed, huh . . .?"

"Don't you find it odd?"

"Where did Bayer fly to every day?" I asked, ignoring Arabel's immediate question.

"That . . . I do not know," Arabel answered, with a defeated tone. "Just . . ."

"Just . . .?"

"He flew around nine thousand kilometers a day. We have this on record. In terms of time, isn't that about seven or eight hours?"

"What sort of jet did he rent?"

"An E-901 'Python' manufactured by Aero Gravas. It was a new type with an extra tank."

"That's a VTOL flyer. With full tanks, it seems like he flew it to the limit," said Yuri. She knows a lot about planes and air ships.

"That seems a little extravagant for sightseeing . . ." I threw in.

"The crash of a talented pilot who flew every day for an unknown purpose. Isn't it a little hard to ask me not to carry any suspicions?"

"You have a point . . ." My interest was raised. Something wasn't clicking right in this case. "Are there any other discrepancies you can tell us about?"

"There is one more. And now for the star of the show . . ." Arabel said this with an exaggerated expressiveness. He was quite the performer.

"Tell us, puh-leaze!" I said, trying to get him to hurry up and spit it out.

"Bayer's identity," Arabel said, surprisingly casually.

"Identity . . . ? Whose identity?"

"I wanted to get some details on Bayer, so I requested some documents from Maleenay. Usually a request from the outside wouldn't be possible, but since I am an inspector, they made a special exception, and I received the files. I have an excerpt here. It describes his physical characteristics. Shall I read it to you?"

Arabel pulled out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. Raising his voice, he began to read out loud.

"... Height: one meter and 76 centimeters. Weight: 82 kilograms. Hair: brown, thick. Eyes: amber. Three-centimeter scar on forehead. Race: mainly Caucasian and so on and so on . . . it goes."

"So—?"

"Look at the autopsy report of the body that washed ashore, and it will become clear," said Arabel.

"Height: one meter and 61 centimeters. Weight: 54 kilograms. Hair, thinning, strawberry blond. Eyes: gray . . ."

"That's a totally different person!" I shouted, spelling it out for everyone to hear.

"Correct," Arabel replied strongly. "Bayer's corpse isn't Bayer at all."

"Then . . . well, then . . . who is it?"

"That's what I couldn't figure out. I sent our Bayer's physical

description to Maleenay, but all they would say is that it is impossible to make a comparison . . ."

"That is too weird! That doesn't make any sense!" For some reason this was getting me riled up, and I began to speak in a loud voice while staring down at the carpet.

"But . . ." Arabel said quietly. "There is something even more strange . . ."

"Oh?"

Not expecting this response I raised my head with a start.

"The Topaz City police." Arabel looked me straight in the eye. "Don't forget, they have the same information that I hold here in my hand."

"Ah!" I gave out a little shriek. He was right. The Topaz City police should know the same information.

"They processed the corpse Bayer as the real Bayer and the incident as an accident . . ."

"This is becoming a really complex murder case."

"I came up with the same conclusion."

"You can say that again! You really can! Can say that again! Right, Yuri?"

The words sounded loopy coming out of my mouth. But there was no response from Yuri. I turned to look at her.

"Yuri . . .?"

Yuri was looking off in another direction. She was staring at the door to the hotel corridor.

"Yuri . . .!"

I raised my voice a little when I called, and like she was waking from a dream, Yuri snapped back to reality and looked at me.

"Kei," Yuri said. "Do you smell something burning?"

"Hm?"

I was distracted for a brief moment, and then sniffed the air before I spoke.

"No, not really . . . hm? Now that you say so . . . something does smell funny . . ."

"Kei, Look!" Yuri pointed at the door. "Smoke's coming in—!"

"Ack!"

I looked where Yuri was pointing, and swallowed my breath.

It was just as Yuri had said. Thin wisps of smoke were rising from the gaps around the edge of the door. Yuri, Arabel, and I all jumped to our feet and rushed to the door. Yuri grasped the door-knob, and pulled the door open with all her might.

At that moment, a massive wave of smoke rolled into the room.

"It's a fire!" Yuri screamed. "The corridor is on fire!"

"Holy . . .!" I shouted over Yuri, not to be outdone.

"The fire alarm isn't going off! And the sprinklers haven't come on!"

But it was no time for whining. Looking like the whipping tongue of an angry dragon, through the smoke I could see the fire drawing closer.

chapter 3

beautiful girls on fire . . . !

My nose was getting runny, and tears rolled down my face. This was not good. I was suffocating!

"Kaff . . . Koff . . . Koff . . . Kaff—"

Arabel looked like he was going to hack up a lung. It seems he took in a lot of smoke. I shut the door as fast as I could. We couldn't escape down the hotel corridor, anyway. First, we needed to get some fresh air in the room.

"What are we going to do?" Yuri asked me.

Arabel was hunched over and gasping and I patted his back. We had no way of sealing the door area completely to keep smoke from getting in. The thick cloud was really billowing in through the gaps around the door. Because each of the three connecting rooms had a door leading to the hallway, the rooms would soon be completely full. It was only a matter of time.

"Is the ventilation system not working?"

"Seems so. The air isn't moving!"

"Damn!"

I grabbed the heatgun strapped to my hip. I pointed it at the window and pulled the trigger. Because they use a special glass it took two or three seconds for the window to melt, and then evaporate completely. A cool wind blew into the room with a whoosh, knocking over a glass on the table. The wind thirty-nine stories up is strong.

"We still can't open the door yet," I said to the other two. "There will be a flashover explosion!"

"Yipe!" Yuri nodded in agreement.

"It's no good!" Arabel cried out. "The door is getting hot. Either we stay put and burn alive, or die by flashover!"

"Dammit . . ."

I surveyed our surroundings. I couldn't spot anything that could be of any use. On top of that, we were starting to lose the lights. Evidently we had lost power. The phone would no longer work either.

I rushed over to the window. I glared out the giant hole I had made with my heatgun. I felt I would be engulfed by the wind, and it was a little scary.

The sunlight came in at a steep angle, but the sky was still blue. It should have been the peaceful time, when afternoon drifts into evening. This is date time. This is not the time of day for bloody carnage!

Suddenly there was a dull explosion coming from my left. I jumped and turned to look, only to see that about ten meters away, on the same floor, a window had blown out and five-meter flames shot out the hole, whirling with the wind. This had become an enormous fire. No doubt another guest had opened their door unprepared, and caused a flashover.

I leaned out the window to see the situation below. The room we were in, #3907, didn't look out over a main street. Below us was a courtyard. It was as if the courtyard was full of ants, you could see groups of black dots growing and spreading. They were hotel guests who were trying to escape. Looking closely, it seemed that up to about the twentieth floor, smoke was billowing out of almost all the windows. The fire must have started at the ground floor. That meant we couldn't escape from below. Jumping was certainly the fastest way out, but from the thirty-ninth floor, even with anti-gravity or emergency shock absorb nets, it would probably be fatal.

"There's a heliport on the roof, if we can get up there, a helicopter or VTOL can come pick us up."

Leave it to Yuri, that was the way to go! But the corridor was a sea of flames. How could we get up to the fifty-fourth floor to get to the roof? We couldn't even get to the emergency stairs.

"No matter how you look at it, it is too strange that none of the emergency equipment is working!" said Arabel, who appeared to have calmed down and came over to Yuri and me. Until now he'd been upset and pacing the room in circles. "I have a feeling this wasn't a sudden accident."

"You could say that!" I said. "Your intuition seems to be right more often than not . . ."

Below our window I could see paramedics and police. In the air were news helicopters buzzing around. Dammit, even with helicopters right there, stuck in this room, there was nothing they could do to help us. Even space suits could help. And we had them, only they were in our room on the fortieth floor.

Our room!

I suddenly had a flash of inspiration. Then the same thing happened to Yuri. We looked at each other and squealed.

"Mugi!"

Mugi was in room #4011. The fire probably hadn't made it that far yet.

"The ring . . .!"

Yuri urged. Without taking the time to respond, I grasped the ring on the right ring finger in my left hand and squeezed. The ring made a small click.

"Wha-what is that?"

Arabel asked, straining his neck.

"You will find out soon! Just wait a second!"

Knowing that Mugi was coming, a wave of security swept over me, and just to make him sweat, I gave Arabel a vague answer. Not understanding what was going to happen, Arabel looked a little uneasy.

After turning the switch on my ring, I listened carefully. I wasn't sure how Mugi would make his entrance. He wasn't always one to employ a lot of common sense.

Forty seconds had already passed.

"He's here . . ."

Skrit skrit. I heard a kind of scratching sound. Yuri was looking up. The ceiling! I followed Yuri's eyes.

The ceiling was covered with illuminating panels. With the power out, they were just gray plastic boards. Suddenly small fissures started to appear in the panels. Pieces began to fall to the ground. We moved up close to the wall to avoid the falling debris. Arabel's back got stiff, and he looked like he was about to cry. How cute! The cracks in the ceiling were as big as they were going to get without crashing down.

Right then there was a tremendous noise as the ceiling broke completely open and came falling to the floor. The table directly below was crushed under the debris. A very nice sofa was also busted apart. There was now a gaping hole in the ceiling. From the jagged gap a black shadow appeared and flew out of the hole.

"Waa!" Arabel yelled in surprise.

Atop the rubble pile of plastic, concrete, and steel landed the nimble black shadow.

The black shadow was really our pet, Mugi—"The Black Destroyer" is his nickname. Mugi followed the emergency signal broadcast by my ring, and came down to us.

You've heard of a Mugi before, right? Their faces look a lot like a typical Earth cat's. Their bodies, black as the void of space, are bigger than normal-sized humans. They have long feelers, one coming from each shoulder, with suction cups at the tips, and their

ears are actually made up of very fine tendril-like hair. The feelers are each about as long as a human arm, and can be used the same way, as well. By vibrating their fine winding hair, the Mugi can manipulate electromagnetic waves and electric currents at will. Their round black eyes are cute as can be, but from their four thick legs grow claws like trimming shears, that look as dangerous as they are, even from far off. They are said to be at least as smart as, if not smarter, than humans. Their physical strength, intelligence, and abilities are about as perfect as you can get.

"Mgya . . ."

There was a short little meow and Mugi walked over to where we were. It'd been over eight hours since we left Mugi in the morning. Thinking about it, that wasn't a nice thing to do to the moody Mugi. And a bunch of that time was because Game Genocide was just too much fun. Grumble grumble . . .

Mugi was purring softly as he rubbed his giant body against Yuri's and my legs. Back and forth, back and forth, boy he was laying the guilt trip on thick.

"Is it—is it . . . tame?" Arabel, recovered from the shock, asked skittishly as he came a little closer.

"Well of course he is!" I shot back and scowled. "Mugi is our teammate! Don't call him an 'it'!"

"Oh . . . I am sor-sorry . . ." Surprised by my response, Arabel quickly apologized.

"Umm . . ." Yuri broke in. "This is no time for casual introductions. Look at the door! It's about to collapse!"

Uwaa! I quickly looked over my shoulder. It was exactly as Yuri had described. The special metal door, covered in splendid designs was glowing an intense red, and was about to melt completely away. Yipes! I doubted if we had even five minutes.

"For starters, let's go up!" I said. "The fire may have already made it up there, but if we can get to room #4011, our space suits are there. With them we should be in good shape."

"Roger!"

Yuri nodded and turned to Arabel.

"Mr. Arabel!" said Yuri hurriedly. "Grab a hold of Mugi!"

"Bu-but . . ."

Arabel's trembling voice didn't match his appearance. His back went stiff again. Jeez, act like a man, would you?

"Just get on!" I shouted, having completely lost all patience. I was one steamed-up battleship, not to be second-guessed. Realizing this, Arabel popped up like a jack-in-the-box and jumped on Mugi's back. That's right! Why couldn't he just do that in the first place?

"Hold on tight to Mugi's neck so that you don't get thrown off!" Yuri warned Arabel. Arabel was pale as a phantom, and he nodded vigorously without saying a word. He wrapped his arms around Mugi's neck and held on for dear life.

"Go up and drop off Arabel," I said to Mugi. Mugi replied,

"Naago . . ."

With Arabel on his back, Mugi effortlessly jumped from the floor, and disappeared through the hole in the ceiling. Soon Mugi

was back, this time without his passenger.

Next was Yuri's turn. Flapping her silver boots, she straddled Mugi. Before I knew it, he was gone and back again. Much faster this time than with Arabel. No doubt Arabel took his own scaredy-cat time getting off of Mugi.

I mounted Mugi, this nice shapely butt planted firmly on his back. Mugi leaned down, bending his entire body back. He was building up strength, like a stretching bow about to fire an arrow.

Right at that moment it happened.

The door began to make a hideous sound that could be mistaken for a scream. Yipes! It had begun to melt.

"Hit it, Mugi!"

It all came down to this. All I could do was to get Mugi's rear in gear. Mugi jumped. In one leap he must have cleared six or seven meters.

We landed in the room above. Logic told me it should be room #4007. Yuri and Arabel just stood there frozen. The walls around the room were covered in scratches and cracks. There was a three-meter hole in one wall. This is how Mugi must have come through to find us. There would be holes in all the walls to #4011.

"Let's go through this hole! Hurry!" I yelled as Mugi's four paws landed on the floor. Aren't they coming? Yuri and Arabel stood without moving. I snapped into a fury once again.

"Flashover on the way! Move it or you're toast!"

"Yah!"

First Yuri got the message, and she slipped through the hole in



the wall. The sluggish Arabel was next, and he followed Yuri through the hole. Still riding on Mugi's back, Mugi and I escaped from the room.

My ears started ringing before I could realize that the explosion happened. The floor buckled underneath us.

Fire shot straight up from the hole in the floor we escaped from. We hit the floor, keeping as low as possible, but still the unforgiving hot air swept over us, trying to pull us up, its feverish temperature forcing us to pant for oxygen. The flames from the corridor had breached the door in Arabel's room and had met a fresh oxygen supply, creating an explosive reaction which forced the flames up through the hole Mugi had made in the ceiling. This is what they call a flashover.

"Hurry, let's get to that other room . . ."

Even though I was suffocating, I had to get the other two motivated to move. Mugi starting shoving all three of us from behind. His persistence forced us through to safety. Long story short, if it wasn't for Mugi, we'd have been burned alive.

We stumbled into room #4011.

I immediately opened up the case holding our metallite alloy transparent space suits, and started to put mine on. Yuri did the same.

"Uhh . . ." said Arabel timidly. "I couldn't expect that you might have one for me, could I?"

"Nope," Yuri answered bluntly.

Poor Arabel! The blood drained from his face, and he collapsed to the floor.

"He'll be okay." I went over to help. "How do you think your 1.8 meter frame would fit in our space suits, anyway? I have another idea for you, so don't go giving up so quickly!"

"Ano-another idea . . . you say?"

Arabel lifted his head.

"Yeah, you are going to hold onto Mugi's back, and he'll climb up the outside wall to the roof."

"Aaah . . ."

Something in Arabel seemed to turn off, and he collapsed onto the carpet again.

"Quit acting like a baby!" I lost it. Again. "Going straight up a vertical wall is nothing to Mugi. Don't worry and leave it to him!"

"Bu-but . . ." Arabel said, looking absolutely defeated. "I have a fear of heights."

"Not another damn word!" I wasn't going to give Arabel another chance to speak. "No one's ever died from being afraid of heights, but people do die inside burning buildings, and right now we are inside a burning building!"

" . . ."

"Now get on and hold on tight!"

"O-okay"

Getting the idea, Arabel closed his eyes and mounted Mugi's back.

"Mugi, go!"

Mugi blasted through the windowpane. The glass broke into a million tiny pieces, and Mugi flew outside the hotel. Arabel's long scream trailed slowly in the distance.

"Now that that part's over . . ." I said. "Now it's our turn."

"It looks like this room might flashover too, huh?"

"Let's blow the door, and then the blast will go in the opposite direction. If we can get to the hallway, we can leave the rest to our space suits."

"That's a terrible plan!"

Yuri was surprised, but she soon agreed to it. There really wasn't any other way.

We placed plastic explosives around the already hot door, flipped the bed onto its side, and hunkered behind it. I hit the blast switch. With a gigantic boom, the door flew off its hinges, and smoke quickly poured in through the opening. However, the force of the blast had quieted the fire around the doorway.

"Let's go!"

Yuri and I entered the hellfire hallway. Our bodies safe inside our securely sealed space suits, we set out. The roar of the flames came through all too clearly on my helmet mic. Stretched so thin it's nearly transparent, metallite alloy is lightweight, flexible, strong, and heat-resistant. Really amazing stuff. A fire like the one we were trudging through was perfectly safe. Don't get me wrong, our suits could protect us, but it still felt like we were walking through an iron-processing plant, so I wouldn't go so far as to say we were enjoying ourselves.

It took us about fifteen minutes to climb the emergency stairs and get to the roof. At the heliport Mugi and a completely exhausted and broken Arabel were waiting. Waving my arms, I signaled an emergency helicopter flying above. The helicopter landed on

the heliport to pick us up. As we flew off, I looked back to see that up to the forty-first or forty-second floor the hotel was completely engulfed in flames. Yup, we were damn lucky to be alive.

I talked with the pilot and got him to drop us off at an open space not too far from the hotel. I wanted to talk with someone who knew details about the fire. Why the alarms and sprinklers didn't go off, the timing of the fire, and to use Arabel's words, to say I didn't think this fire was due to natural causes.

"Hey!" Yuri said in a strange voice as we walked toward the fire department's temporary headquarters.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Thunder and Lucha!" Yuri pointed toward an air car coming our way. "That's them!"

"Yeah, you're right."

I was also able to recognize the pair. On the main street crowded with onlookers peering at the burning Alternera-Lamier Hotel, there was one air car traveling the opposite direction, away from the hotel. Riding in that air car was our brother and sister team of Thunder and Lucha. Thunder was driving, and his little sister sat in the passenger seat. Their faces were covered black in what looked like soot.

"I wonder if they were in the casino the whole time," Yuri said to herself out loud.

"Seems so," I abruptly responded. I didn't feel like being made a fool of again by Yuri.

"After that run-in with the security guards, they sure must be brave to stick around like that."

"Let's not worry about that now . . ." I said. "For now, let's get to the fire headquarters."

"Sure, okay."

We allowed Thunder and Lucha's air car to pass us by, and we turned back to the right to face the Alternera-Lamier Hotel. At that point the hotel was nothing but a pillar of flames.

chapter 4

who's really pulling the strings?

After finishing our questioning we were exhausted, and made our way to the inspector's official residence. Entering just ahead of us, he welcomed us into his home. We had been rough on Arabel today, but we had also gotten him home alive. Naturally we expected him to be a gracious host. Our questioning at the scene had not produced much in the way of useful information, and a wave of fatigue passed over us. A little hospitality would go a long way.

"Waa!"

We were led to the guest bedroom. Yuri grudgingly pulled off her boots then dived head first, landing on the bed. She looked like she was in heaven as she closed her eyes. From the foot of the bed Mugi licked Yuri's toes which were sticking out.

"Tee hee . . ." Yuri giggled. Hmph . . . Could this be the same girl who just escaped from a burning building?

"I'm gonna take a shower," I said while I rubbed in a special

cream from my neck down, designed to wash away strong ultra-thin transparent polymers from the skin. Thanks to these protective second skins we can walk around outside dressed as we are. Because of the nature of our work, if we didn't we'd probably be all covered in cuts and bruises. I tossed all my clothes and underwear aside and entered the shower room. I alternated between super-hot and super-cold showers. After I felt that I got all the sweat and grime off me, I wrapped myself in a towel and exited. The color rushed to my light-cocoa-shaded skin and . . . Oh, ha ha . . . this is starting to sound erotic! For a body that spent a day traveling to hell and back, I gotta say, I was looking pretty good. If there had been a man here right now, I would have had him eating out of my hand in no time. Unfortunately it was just me, Mugi, and the childish Yuri.

Yuri was lying on the bed watching TV. At some point she had taken off her clothes and was just wearing a pair of tastelessly cut pink scanties. Mugi was curled up in a ball at the foot of the bed sleeping peacefully.

"The shower's free," I said out loud, taking a seat.

"Un-huh . . ." Yuri answered half-heartedly. She wouldn't tear her eyes from the television.

"What's got you so hooked?" I assumed it was some hunky guy on the screen when I asked. I looked over at the TV.

"What? You're watching the news . . ." It was serious. On the screen was a decidedly unhandsome middle-aged newscaster.

Yuck! Yuri really does have bad taste.

"Look at that guy! How can you watch this?!"

Saying this, I spun to return to my stool. Yuri turned to me.

"Keep your mumbling down—an Airspace Crushing Bomb went off! The capitol of Weldy is a real mess. Now shush, I can't hear!"

"Yipe!" I looked back at the TV. "Space . . . Space Smasher, again . . . ?"

The Airspace Crushing Bomb—popularly known as a Space Smasher, or SS bomb. Hydrogen bombs, molecule bombs, particle bombs, and the like, mankind had produced any number of horribly effective bombs prohibited under decision by United Galactica. The Airspace Crushing Bomb is just one of those on the list.

The Space Smasher destroys the construction of airspace on a dimensional level.

I can't explain this on my own, so I refer to the WWWW Trakon specs for help. That's the only way it can be clear at all.

A Space Smasher is considered to be a bomb, but it's more accurate to think of it as a kind of delivery agent. It sends out a resonance wave to read the existence of multiple dimensions, and destroys not only matter, but the actual space it hits. (Doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? Ha ha, I don't get it either.) In plain words, if not used carefully, the Space Smasher is a fiercely destructive device which can completely destroy the very existence of the space we live in. And it looks like that is a real possibility . . . What I mean is, eleven years ago sixteen prototypes were manufactured and the dangers of this type of bomb were discovered. All further research and manufacture was prohibited. At that time it was only really effective on more unstable materials, like a planet's crust, yet improvements were being made until it was realized that the potential strength was more than we should or could handle. The

sixteen prototypes were frozen and placed in a secret storage facility. Only the United Galactica Central Computer knows the location of the frozen prototypes. Even still, the only person with access to that information is the head of the alliance. All production data had been erased.

But someone was using the Space Smasher.

The first time damage was reported was on Demden, the capital city of planet Deldeth. In only a single moment 2.4 million lives were destroyed. The entire city of Demden disappeared. The range of destruction was 150 kilometers wide in diameter and eighty kilometers up and down. Anyone within that range could expect death or serious injury.

And that unbelievable act of terrorism didn't stop with Demden.

Dhal on planet Alor, Makal City on planet Ekseks, Secott on planet Gerutotalla, in just the last six months three planet-state capitals were wiped clean off the surface of their planets due to Space Smashers. Death toll was over ten million people. On Gerutotalla the planet's crust must have been brittle, as the explosion forced the single continent to break into several pieces.

Fearful of the situation at hand, United Galactica put together an elite force selected from the United Space Force to conduct a special investigation on the state of the sixteen prototype Space Smashers. All of the sixteen Space Smashers remained in the secret storage facility. The bombs the terrorists were using were not United Galactica Space Smashers, but newly made devices. The plans and designs, however, had all been erased. So who was making these bombs, and how were they making them?

The target for annihilation was Weldy's capital city of Loanda.

"So this is the fifth attack . . . This makes the United Space Force look really bad," I said.

"That's true for the Space Force, but . . ." said Yuri. "Assan's gotta be feeling the heat, too."

"Must be, yeah. He'd be lying if he told us he wasn't sweating."

Assan was a Crime TC, just like us. He was dispatched to investigate the Space Smasher attacks.

"Just between you and me . . ." I offered up, "I wanted to take on that mountain. I was thinking with the scale of that investigation, imagine pulling that off. And we could blow our stained reputation completely away." Our bad name is due to the fact that on every case we've worked so far, there has been some blood spilled, and some call our methods "destructive." Lovely Angels is our cute code name, but thanks to our reputation for leaving a mess, everyone calls us the very uncute nickname Dirty Pair. The WWWW dispatches TCs to investigate incidents depending on their nature and content, based on calculations figured by the United Galactica Central Computer. Neither the TC nor the requesting client can choose who works on what file. If that were the case, with our stinky reputation we'd probably already have been forced to retire from the force. That's how well known we are, in the wrong way.

"But what am I saying . . . ?" I mumbled dreamily. "We didn't get the big one, we got a boring podunk country murder case."

"Now hold on!" Yuri's pretty eyebrows bristled. "Maleenay is not podunk! Get it right! It's just happens to belong to a remote star system, that's all."

"All right, all right!"

Isn't that the definition of podunk? I thought to myself as I withdrew my previous statement. Once Yuri got mad she was pretty intolerable, so I backed down. I would at least take back that part of what I said.

"But at least tell me you know it's going to be boring . . ."

Yuri looked at me coolly, then nodded.

"That's . . . that's probably true . . ."

A dejected silence filled the room. The only sound was the rambling of the newscaster's dry voice from the television.

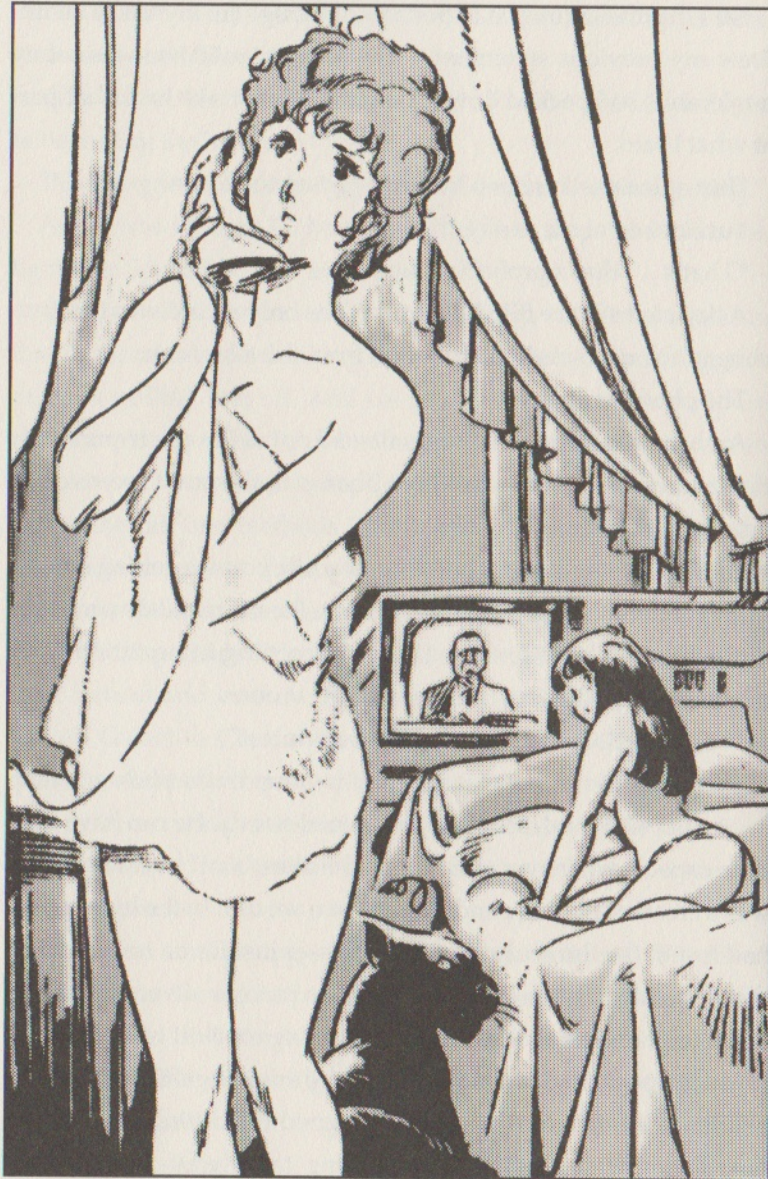
The phone rang.

Arabel's gentle baritone voice flowed out of the receiver into my ear. It seems they don't put video phones in the guest rooms of official residences.

"Hello, I am so sorry to bother you while you are getting settled. I have made arrangements for dinner. Please come down to the dining room. I have procured some interesting information I will present for our dessert," Arabel said all at once.

"Sounds good. Just give us fifteen minutes."

I hung up the phone. Yuri rushed to jump in the shower. Hearing mention of food, Mugi's eyes opened slowly. He can have a kadium capsule whenever or wherever he likes, but if anything, Mugi was a creature of habit, and he ate when we did. In the luggage we had lost in the fire we had packed dresses just for an occasion like this, but since they were now ashes, we put our silver outfits and boots back on and went down to the dining room. It was as beautiful as I expected a United Galactica high-ranking official's official residence to look, and whoever designed the dining room was a fan of gothic style. The huge dining table was covered in a



blinding white tablecloth where Yuri and I sat down next to each other. Arabel sat across from us. It was just the three of us. Our servers were androids. Most of the table remained unused.

Our meal was a very fancy and tasty French dinner. The Geblais wine was also delicious. I stuffed myself with food and drink. Light-eater Yuri glared at me like I was embarrassing her, but I didn't care. It's not as if I was forcing myself to eat it all.

After dinner we had dessert and then tea. Then the time had come.

"There is one more dessert item on the menu, right?" I said. "Some very interesting news, wasn't it?"

Yuri's eyes lit up in anticipation.

"Well, don't rush me—" Arabel said, calmly puffing a cigar at the same time.

Hard to believe this was the same guy who was holding onto Mugi's back screaming.

"I hate to wreck the mood by getting serious . . ." He set his cigar down in an ashtray. "I decided to stop investigating the case on my own, and have spoken with an intelligence bureau agent."

"You're not kidding around . . ." Yuri sputtered.

"You pros really do have a way of doing things." Without pause, Arabel continued. "I discovered who was interfering with the police investigation from behind the scenes."

"Who is it?"

Arabel slowly took another puff from his cigar before speaking again. Jeez, enough with the dramatic pauses . . .

"It is Lamier Superintendent of Game Promotions Standalf."

"What?"

Taken aback by this, Yuri and I both jumped in our seats. Standalf . . . he was the Lamier bigshot that can have people all over the planet moving with one word, wasn't he?!

"But why would a truly powerful man like Standalf care about a country hick from backwoods Maleenay who just happened to die in an accident?"

Words like "country hick" and "backwoods" made Yuri's white cheeks tremble, but I didn't give it a second thought as I asked Arabel.

"It's unfortunate but . . ." Arabel frowned, ". . . the agent I employed is talented, but in the three or four hours he spent investigating, he couldn't come up with that answer. He'll need a few days, it seems."

"I can't wait!" I said, slapping my napkin on the table. "I can't wait a few days."

"Bu-but . . ."

"No buts!"

"How-however . . ."

"No howevers!"

"Wha-what can I do?"

"Where does Standalf spend most of his time?"

"A-at the Lamier Gaming Promotions Tower in District 25. He's on the thirty-first floor, but that's his private executive office . . ."

"We're going there, right now! Take us there—" I stood up.

"Now just wait, wait, wait . . ." Arabel's face went every shade of pale. "It's already nighttime. It's crazy to think . . ."

"What better time to sneak in than at night?!" I fired back with a

shout. "There is no time like the present, right? Mugi will come with us, so get the air car ready!"

"Are-are you really serious . . .?"

"I am always serious!" I puffed out my chest to show him. "Right, Yuri?"

"Right . . ." said Yuri. "A serious idiot."

Cut the last line!

Arabel hesitated for a minute, but seeing that we weren't going to change our minds, he turned and left the dining room. He went to pull the air car out of the garage. In the meantime we ran back up to the guest room and grabbed our heatgun and ray gun. The weapons slid into the respective holsters at our hips.

Coming out the front door, we found Arabel behind the wheel of a large luxury air car. We jumped in and took off.

Now here's a gambling planet! It was night, but with all the neon and laser signs, you couldn't tell the speed limit in the city was 120 kph. After riding for about twenty minutes we made it to the Lamier Gambling Promotions Tower in District 25.

"Please be careful . . ." Arabel actually sounded worried. Mugi gave a guttural rumble in response to Arabel's uncertain tone. Mugi gets in a bad mood if he knows someone doesn't trust us.

We got out of the air car and faced the main entrance to the Lamier Gambling Promotions Tower. Arabel's luxury air car quickly disappeared into the darkness.

"Well now . . ." I said in a low voice. "Where should we get in?"

"Let's just use the front door," replied Yuri, sounding overly burdened. She always gets like this! "There's not really anyone around and . . ."

We ended up going in Yuri's way, only because at that time there really wasn't anyone walking near the building. Also there was a higher chance of security guards being posted at the rear entrance.

We stood in front of the main entrance, which was at the moment hidden behind shutters. This was a job for Mugi. The fine curly hair that Mugi has in place of ears is so sensitive that it can be vibrated to act as night vision sonar. It's this vibration that also allows Mugi to manipulate electromagnetic waves and electricity at will. The shutter was sealed with an electromagnetic lock. So, the key would also be electromagnetic. For Mugi, this would be like taking candy from a baby.

Almost too quickly the shutter slid open. Mugi quickly jumped to disable the alarm switch. No one saw us enter. There should be surveillance cameras, but at this point anyone watching would probably see just static. With no one there to stop us, we got on an elevator. In no time, we were at the thirty-first floor. No one was operating the elevator, but this was also thanks to Mugi.

On the thirty-first floor there was a brilliantly lit illumination control panel.

"Which way?" Yuri whispered, putting her lips right up to my ear. How the hell should I know?!

"Should be that way—" I said, and then walked in the direction I had chosen randomly. Surprisingly, both Yuri and Mugi followed me obediently.

Along a long corridor we came across a series of unmarked doors. I couldn't muster a guess as to what they were there for, so we advanced forward. As we passed one of the blank doors I could

hear the faint sound of a male voice. There was someone else here.

"Mugi . . ." I called softly. Mugi quickly came to me.

"Open this door, just two centimeters."

Mugi's fine winding whiskers vibrated. Without a sound the door opened two centimeters. I peeked in through the opening.

"!"

My blood began to boil. I quickly grabbed Yuri and placed her head at the crack in the door. Her back suddenly twitched. A scream would probably have led to certain death.

From the doorway we could hear the conversation taking place, close enough as if we were a part of it.

"... night's your last night alive. After I take care of you, I'll toss your bodies into the ocean. Get ready to say goodbye . . ."

A very large dark-skinned man was talking to a male and a female who were shackled to the floor by their hands and feet.

Their faces were swollen and bruised, but I could see that the laid out man and woman were none other than Thunder and Lucha. Not only that, but the large man talking was one of the Alternera-Lamier Hotel security guards.

chapter 5

look! look! we're in a car chase

"Wha-what're we gonna do . . . ?" Yuri asked. She had a docile look on her face. I met the eyes of my childhood friend in crisis, her spirit looked to be in shock. Stay sharp! Why do you think we sludged through a year of tough WWA training?

"Break out the Bloody Card!" I said to Yuri. Her eyes widened and she looked at me.

"You want to help them, right? If so, then we gotta cut that big guy down."

"Uh huh . . ."

Yuri gave a tiny nod as she listened to what I said, and then she pulled out a single, silver-colored, playing deck-sized card. She held the Bloody Card, a 0.6 millimeter-thick card made from Teg-noid sheet metal. It has a razor-sharp edge running along all four sides. After being thrown it can stay in the air for up to two hours, thanks to its ion drive, and its direction can be controlled by a

handheld transmitter. All it does is cut, and it does it well. If it's going fast enough it can even slice through two millimeters of KZ alloy like a hot knife through butter. It's a simple but effective weapon.

I continued speaking.

"From here we can't tell if there is anyone else in the room, so set it to stay at an altitude of one meter, and to fly through the entire room. Those two are on their backs, so there's no chance of them getting hurt."

"I got it . . ."

Yuri's face looked calmer. She seemed to have returned to her normal self. I turned to Mugi.

"You stand guard. If someone comes, don't hold back. Tear them to pieces!"

"Garurururu . . ." Mugi replied and bowed his head a little. It's not the fun part, but that's the way it is, was the impression I got from his response. He's hot-blooded, and likes the action . . .

My gaze returned to what lay beyond the crack in the doorway.

In the meantime the dark-skinned guy had pulled out a ray gun. He aimed it at Thunder's head. Dammit! He was about to kill him!

"Throw it!"

Timing wasn't an issue. You just had to get the Bloody Card moving. With a snap of the wrist Yuri sent the Bloody Card whirling into the room. At the same time, Mugi swung the door all the way open. Yuri and I slid in together and in one quick move dove to the center of the room.

"Gurrgg!"

"Kyaa!"

From above our heads we could hear a smattering of horrendous shouts. Blood rained down from above, painting the room a deep red. The casino security guard was still upright, but there was nothing but an empty space above his neck. This must be because he squatted down to get a better shot at Thunder.

The Bloody Card also sliced through another three men. Each of their bodies had blood-soaked areas around their mid-sections. One had been penetrated right through his heart. Instant death. The other two had fatal injuries that never allowed time for a counter-attack.

"Thunder!"

After recovering the Bloody Card, Yuri rushed to Thunder's side. Wha-wha-what was she doing?! Suddenly she's working solo, huh? Not to be outdone, I ran over.

"Thunder!!!"

Yuri raised Thunder up in her arms. Grrr . . . she acted like I wasn't even in the room. Lucha was also left lying there, but since she was a girl, I didn't have the same motivation to help her up. She'd be fine. It was a little awkward, but I moved next to Yuri as she gazed upon Thunder's face. Make a little space!

"Yuri . . ."

His blank eyes opened, and he whispered her name. Did-did he say . . . Yuri?! Why couldn't he say "Kei"?! At first that put my brain in a frenzy, but then when I thought about it for a second, I realized that Thunder didn't know my name. Hee hee.

"Thunder . . .!"

Yuri clasped Thunder's hand, and moisture started welling in

her eyes. Streams of passionate tears flowed down her snow-white cheeks. Normally it would be a very moving scene, but I found it annoying. I couldn't let this go on any longer. They needed to be split up.

"We should get moving," I said sounding really worried, but at the same time, with an unforgiving tone. "I think they know we're here by now."

I forcefully pulled Thunder and Yuri's hands apart, and rubbed Thunder's shoulder.

"Yuri, can you go help Lucha? I'll tend to Thunder," I said it to Yuri in the most innocently natural and oblivious way I could. Without suspicion, Yuri hurried over to check on Lucha.

I helped scoop Thunder up to his feet. This is a man, a real man. I felt it through his warm skin.

"Yuri . . ."

Thunder muttered again. This is no good. I couldn't let him say it again so I whispered in his ear.

"Yuri's not here right now. For whatever heartless reason, she went away. I'm Kei. I'll stay with you. I am sweeter than Yuri! I am cuter than Yuri! I am more beautiful than Yuri!"

Tap tap. Someone was tapping on my back. C'mon, buzz off! I was just getting to the good stuff! As I was about to say this I turned around on one heel to be face-to-face with an angry-looking Yuri. No, not good! I started to titter nervously and Yuri shouted.

"What the hell are you saying to him? Talk about backstabbing!" Reasonably speaking, what Yuri said was true. But I put feelings ahead of reason. I wasn't about to lose, and I wasn't about to cry!

"Shut up—!" I responded in a piercing shout.

However, in reality, it really wasn't the time or place for petty spats. My excuse to get next to Thunder had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We had been discovered, and could hear Mugi trading blasts with the enemy down the corridor.

"Mgyaow . . .!"

Chased by ray-gun blasts, Mugi bounded into the room. Mugi is amazingly advanced life forms, but still will be struck down if hit by a laser blast.

"Yuri!"

I gave her a sign with my eyes. Yuri gave me a single nod. We heaped Thunder and Lucha onto Mugi's back. It must have been a little heavy, but without Mugi carrying the siblings, we wouldn't be able to fight back.

We grabbed the heatgun and ray gun from our hips and pressed our backs up against the wall. We slid over to the edge of the doorway. Tep tep, the sound of walking reverberated. I could tell that whoever it was, they were coming our way. From the right. Yuri pulled out the Bloody Card one more time and got it ready. With a snap of the tips of her fingers, she sent it flying down to the right-hand side of the hall.

We heard a yell. It turned into a spine-chilling scream. We had scored first blood. Yuri and I dove headfirst into the corridor, and turned left with our guns blazing. Bright, threadlike beams mixed with orange heat rays, our shots went clean through the oversized enemies. One by one the men screamed in agony before falling to the floor. They were this building's security guards. Few things smell as awful as the stink of burning flesh.



After satisfying its own bloodlust, the Bloody Card returned. That end of the hallway looked like the back room at a butcher shop. With Thunder and Lucha still draped on his back, Mugi stepped out of the room we were in.

"To the elevator!" I shouted. "Let's get out of here!"

In front of the elevator it looked like a German Panzer Division lined up at the French border. There must have been twenty soldiers. Lined up shoulder to shoulder they held heavy-duty laser guns aimed from the hip. They wore the security guard uniforms, but the aura about them was completely different. These weren't security guards. It was a company of yakuza.

The troops spotted us, and began discharging their laser guns. The strong laser beams blasted through a wall. With these guns, it didn't matter that we were thirty meters away from them. Left under these circumstances, we were done for.

"Grrrrr . . ."

Mugi growled. His fine twisty whiskers began to vibrate. In a blink, the brightly lit illumination panel went out. Mugi had cut the power to it. It happened so suddenly, my eyes hadn't grown accustomed. We were completely engulfed in darkness.

"Let's get out of here!"

With the sides of our bodies flush against the wall we ran as fast as we could. A few shots from the laser guns sliced through the black, but nowhere near where we were. We covered the distance in one burst. My eyes were adjusting to the dark. We got face down on the floor and slid ourselves several more meters. The reinforced polymer outfits we wore cut down on frictional heat. Mugi's back was bowed, and he wasn't moving.

As I anticipated, the powerless panel came back to life. It was just as sudden as when it went out.

"Whoa . . .!"

We had completely faked out the company of security guards, putting them in a panic. We were less than five meters from them. Even though there were twenty people right next to us, they were completely oblivious.

Living up to their names, Yuri had the ray gun and I used the heatgun to spew fire. There was a whirlwind of screams and bel-lows. Fire and laser beams flew through the air in all directions. The number of troops standing dropped each second. Ten men . . . five men . . . four men . . . two men . . .

The last man standing was charred black.

A second later Mugi ran to join us. The doors to the elevator opened. We all got on at the same time, and the elevator began to move.

"Jus' hold on one min . . ." Thunder said, barely audibly.

"Jus' hold on! We don' wanna go down. We gotta go up. Up—on the roof, the air car we came in is up there. It can go high altitude, for short spurts. The guys here don' know about that. We can' leave goin' down. We gotta go up . . ."

Thunder's voice grew faint, and then completely quiet. He had lost consciousness. He had squeezed out the last of his strength to tell us. If it wasn't for his backwoods accent, it might have actually been a moving scene.

"What should we do?" Yuri asked.

"Let's follow Thunder's advice," I said. "If there's an air car on the roof, then we should be going up."

"Sounds good to me. Let's get moving up," Yuri agreed with me. The elevator started to go in the other direction. Because his vocal chords are different, Mugi can't speak in the same way as humans. However, he can understand everything we say.

We arrived at the roof.

It was easy to spot the air car. It was camouflaged under a cover next to the entrance to the emergency stairs. We pulled off the cover. It was the same car we saw them leaving from the Alternera-Lamier Hotel in during the day. When we were wondering where they were going, well, it seems they were going here. You can never tell how things are going to turn out.

We got in the air car and took off. I was driving. Yuri had a cloudy look in her eyes. Don't worry, leave it to me!

Day hadn't broken yet. Of course, it was still nighttime! It hadn't even been an hour since we had entered the building. The sky was still dark, but on the ground below it looked like daytime, from all the lights and activity.

I flew above, through the darkness, then when we got to a nearby building, I circled it and descended. The air car felt like it had a powerful engine, and I guessed I hadn't even seen what this baby could do yet. I assumed the altitude monitor warning devices had been removed. I was traveling fifteen centimeters above the highway standard altitude, and no warning buzzers were going off.

I was flying on against the thirty-meter-high air car highway, which was built away from buildings. Obviously this was a traffic violation, but who was going to see us? Anyway, we are WWA Trouble Consultants. No problem.

I got on the highway. For now, we headed toward Arabel's residence. Maybe we were being rude, bringing even more baggage into his home in the form of the unconscious siblings, but where else could we go? He'd forgive us.

"Kei . . ." Yuri whispered loudly from the passenger seat. Her tone was stiff. "We've been followed."

"No way . . .!"

As I was thinking about how impossible a notion that could be I looked into the rear-view screen. I could see beams filling the display. All I knew for sure was that there was one vehicle behind us. Whether or not it was following us, I couldn't decide.

"They came down from above the highway," Yuri stuck out her chin. Well, if that was true, then it was suspicious if they indeed didn't enter the air-car highway from a bypass, but came down from above. Then if we stay on the highway, we should be able to tell what kind of people we are dealing with: criminals, or cohorts of the security-guard yakuza.

"Let's speed up a little," I said. "We have a honey of an engine, 500 kph is child's play. If they can keep up, then we'll know that they came prepared."

"This isn't a joke." Yuri was turning red. "You may be prepared to go five hundred kilos, but what about me? Ask me before you start making these kinds of decisions!"

"Ha ha! I can't hear you!"

I pushed the rear jet to maximum. The speedometer jumped straight up. This thing had some pickup! The G-forces pressed me back into my bucket seat. Our speed hit 500 kph. The highway

lights and neon signs looked exactly like stars when jumping into warp speed. Traces like comet tails streamed off them as they passed. This . . . this is cool! I gotta remember that I am driving . . .

"Don't look, Kei," said Yuri. "But, they are still behind us."

I took a quick glance at the rear-view screen to see. My cheek twitched. It was the same headlights as before. In a seemingly taunting move, they maintained the exact same distance behind us as before, despite the speed.

"If you get it now, feel free to slow down!" Yuri added sarcastically. "My nerves have just about reached their limit."

Shrug, nya! I snorted my nose, and turned off the rear-jet propulsion. Scaredy cat! Are you even qualified to ride in an air car?!

I slowed the air car down to 300 kph. That's about the top end of a normal cruising pace. Yawn . . . Boring.

"Son of a . . ." Yuri spat out. *What could it be now?* I was thinking. I looked at the screen.

"They are really going to do it."

The shine from the headlights suddenly got so big it was blinding. It was just a blurred white mass. The car behind us didn't slow down.

"Git-git out of the way . . ."

A voice floated in from the rear. It was Thunder. Yuri quickly twisted her neck to look back.

"Thunder . . ."

She used her best worried voice. Ugh! Dammit! If I wasn't driving right now . . .!

"We gotta git outta the way!" said Thunder. At some point Lu-cha had also regained consciousness.

"Those guys are killers! They don't care about anything. Who knows what kinda psychos you will find if they catch us. . ."

"What the hell is he talking about?" I asked, laughing. "We are WWWA Crime TCs! Make no mistake! I'll tear those yakuza troops into scrap!"

"Really . . ." Thunder chuckled. "Y'all 're the Dirty Pair, huh?"

"Gurp—!"

I was speechless. How, how could he be so cruel? That's the last line I wanted to hear from a handsome hunk like Thunder. Is that how cursed we were? Sickening. It's like something out of a nightmare . . . Just knock it off! Don't let those words come near your mouth. Our codename is Lovely Angels!

There was almost no distance between us and the car following us. Almost time for some carnage . . .

I opened up the lower propulsion jets. We jumped straight up with a jolt. Pow, pow, pow . . . Red laser streaks came from the air car behind us. The radioactive-looking beams were now coming from far below. Look at yourselves! You can't screw with us!

I turned the air car around and pointed it straight down. Might as well do them in before they do us in. Time to turn the tables.

"Stop! Kei!" Yuri shouted. Somehow she was always sensitive to the moment I went into attack mode.

What's that? Oops, too late now! You can't win by always trying to get away.

I was going to make a dash for the enemy air car's tail, and plunged nose first. Victory was ours. Here's how we would win this battle.

"Yuri, open your window and shoot them with your laser!" I

shouted. We could hit the engine or the driver, wherever, the results would be the same. Even the complaining Yuri could see the plan, and she was quiet and focused.

With the checkmate killing blow set, all that was left was the final strike . . . but at the last moment the enemy deftly scooted aside, avoiding our attack.

"Hey, hey, hey . . ."

No doubt, that pilot know how to handle his vehicle. While I cursed to myself, I turned the air car around. Aack! I don't want to go out like this! Laser beams were hitting our air car all over.

"This is what I thought would happen," Yuri scorned me openly. Giving up already? Here's where the fun really begins!

I pegged the acceleration, again. I blew off the highway and slipped into the chasm between two buildings.

"Ka, kyaa . . .!"

Yuri choked out a crackled yelp. Where's your nerve?! You think this is scary . . . ?

We had flown into an area filled with skyscrapers. It must have been Topaz City's administrative district. Typical of Lamier, there were casinos even here.

Weaving between buildings, I was driving the air car like a maniac—nope, not driving, but flying. Who knew where we were going? Left, then right, then up, then down—we were greased lightning—or so I thought, as the enemy air car was still right on our tail. And on top of that they were shooting lasers at us. Who could possibly keep up with me?!

Suddenly a building popped up right in front of us.

It totally came from out of nowhere. My hair stood on end. I slammed the reverse thrusters and lower thrusters on max. Yuri made a sound like a retching scream, and my ears starting ringing. When your body suddenly experiences just over six Gs your head starts to swim, and you feel like you are going to throw up.

Ka-BOOM! We heard the sound of an explosion from far away. I softly hit the gas and brought our altitude down. It turns out the explosion wasn't that far away. The G-forces had affected my hearing. For one moment the air car chasing us hadn't been able to keep up with my flying, and had flown into that building at 500 kph. The owner of the building was going to be mad, but at least government buildings aren't full of people at night. I was sure they had insurance, anyway.

"Hoo ho ho ho . . ."

I was riding high. I mean, that fierce air car chase, and we came out victorious! I felt like a million bucks! Yuri glared at me with a bitter look. But there was nothing she could say. Naturally! These hands saved her life. What could she possibly have to complain about? Floating on adrenaline I turned the air car on its tail and did a celebratory zig-zag. My pride had clouded my vision.

"Kei, look out!" Yuri screamed. My eyes opened wide, and I grasped the lever tight. But it was too late.

A gaudy laser advertising tower stood right in our path. The air car flew straight into the steel truss holding the tower up.

The air car's exterior made a crunching sound and I could feel the engine lose power. Whump, our altitude dropped. We must have fallen out of the advertising tower, as the brilliant lights were



now pulling away behind us. Even still, the stalling air car had suffered some pretty serious damage. Smoke started pouring out here and there on the inside.

"Idiot! Stupid! Brainless! Third rate! Rude! Irresponsible! Numb-skull! Redhead! . . ."

As Yuri showered me with her rather limited supply of insults, I frantically landed what was left of our vehicle in the center of a nearby park.

chapter 6

here it is! this is our super power!

"But why did you go that way?"

As we had escaped from the beat-up air car, which was now engulfed in flames, Yuri had been bawling me out the entire time. But now we were sitting in a circle in a corner of the park, and I had gotten Yuri to clam up and the cross-examination of Thunder and Lucha had begun.

"Us guys were . . ." Thunder began, trying not to open up too much; despite my enthusiastic persuasions, he kept a stiff attitude. "Well, us guys came over to Lamier to get revenge . . ."

"Revenge? For who?"

His unexpected answer took me off-guard.

"Dr. Russell."

We had never seen Thunder say something as seriously as he did just now.

"Dr. Russell?" Yuri and I said at the same time. It was a name I had never heard before. It looked like Yuri hadn't either. That I

hadn't was one thing, but his childhood friend Yuri didn't even know what the heck he was talking about. All the way from Ma-leenay this brother and sister team came to get revenge. Maybe it was someone they knew a long time ago, or otherwise some really important somebody . . .

"Dr. Russell is . . ." Thunder looked at his feet, and lowered his voice. ". . . someone us guys owe a great debt of gratitude to."

"I—" Yuri's mouth fell open. "I don't have any memory of a person named Dr. Russell."

"It was the same year you went home to Yocha . . ."

Thunder looked up at Yuri with sadness in his eyes.

"Our ma and pa had died in a sprinkler accident."

"Uncle and Auntie—!" Yuri shouted, her face turning red. Her eyes got big and wide and her entire body started shaking.

"Yup . . ." Thunder stuck his chin out slightly. "Jus' like that, we was orphans."

"That's awful . . ." Yuri's fists rested on each side of her mouth. Tears shone in her eyes. "All this time, I never knew . . ."

Thunder slowly shook his head to the left and right.

"You don' got nothin' to apologize fer, Yuri. We didn' wan' anyone to worry, so we said nothin' to nobody. So o'course, you couldn' a known."

". . . Mm . . ." As she wiped tears off her face, Yuri nodded listlessly. "You saying that makes me feel a little better . . ."

The two looked at each other at the same time, and heat rose from their glance into each others' eyes. Little hearts floated like bubbles in the air—what, what the hell is going on here? At a time like this? Do you think I can allow this baloney to occur? What,

did some god die or something? A stud like this . . . into Yuri—?!

"Hate to interrupt . . . !" I said, all business-like. "But we really are short on time. Can you please begin where you left off?"

"Eh . . . ah, aha . . . yeah, okay . . ." Thunder looked as if he just awoke from a dream.

"Yeah . . . How, how far had I gotten . . . ?"

"The part where your parents passed away," I said flatly.

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry 'bout that."

Thunder replied, in a truly simple and rustic way. It was a refreshingly honest apology. Hey, Yuri, don't look into those eyes!

"—so us guys were these two confused orphans, and who come and took us and raised us up? It was our doctor neighbor, Russell." Unaware of the daggers I was throwing at Yuri in my head, Thunder continued his story.

"Dr. Russell was really quite a fellow. I don't know when he blew on to Maleenay, but he wasn't a native. He lived his whole life a single man, all on his own. On accounta that, people treated him like he's some sorta weirdo. But in his heart he was a kind man, a man of real character."

"I see . . ." I said attentively. By doing so it made it feel like just Thunder and I were having the conversation . . . Tee hee, I am bad, aren't I?

"By standard time, it woulda been 'bout four months ago or so. One day the Doc said he was goin' to take a trip to Lamier. Course, we was real surprised. We knew Lamier is a gambling star. Us guys had no idea what the Doc could be wantin' to do here. First I thought he was pullin' our leg . . . but no, he was really goin'.

"Then he called me in and talked to me. He told me 'Thunder, I

have to go to Lamier. I have a responsibility there. And it's very possible that I won't make it back. Thunder, if I die on Lamier, you know that it wasn't an accident. I will have been murdered . . ."

"And then? He died, right?" Yuri asked Thunder. Can it, missy! And keep that trap shut!

"Mm—" Thunder had a mournful look on his face, and nodded in confirmation. "He washed up on Emerald Beach ninety-four days ago. The police considered it a criminal matter, but then were given orders to give up the investigation, so me and Lucha flew here . . ."

"You said ninety-four days ago? On Emerald Beach?" I screeched out, thinking what are the odds of . . . "The same thing happened to a man named Bayer who . . ."

"Bayer is . . ." Thunder broke in my sentence. ". . . the fake name Dr. Russell used to enter Lamier."

"Wha-what?!"

A slight breeze could have knocked Yuri and me over. How, how can this be?! The case we were working on somehow is all mixed up in this!

"Somethin' wrong?"

Seeing our shock, this time it was Thunder asking the questions. We told him what we were doing on Lamier, and why we had snuck into the Lamier Game Promotions Tower.

"That's it!" Thunder's eyes had rekindled their fire. "I knew there was something fishy goin' on . . ."

"Why were you snoopin' all over?" Yuri asked, her Maleenay drawl rearing itself.

"We started at the casino, then tailed one o' them gangster

guards," said Thunder, as if he was describing tying his shoelaces. "And then we got into that tower. We been in Lamier three months, with hardly a bite. We waited outside until it was dark, and then we sneaked ourselves in."

"Wow . . ." I nodded. "So indeed Standalf is somehow involved."

"Standalf?" Thunder had a dubious look on his face. "I heard that name before. But, he died over a year ago . . ."

"Huh?!"

We jumped again. C'mon, what's with this case? I can't make any sense of any of it.

"Say, Thunder," Yuri said in a nauseatingly sweet tone. "Why did Dr. Russell use an alias to get into Lamier?"

"Now that's one thing I couldn't never get . . ." Thunder's head drooped. "He didn't tell us nothin' more before he took off to Maleenay . . ."

"Yuri—!" I said. "I am getting kinda warm."

"So it appears . . ." Yuri agreed and stood up. "Tingling in my spine. Feels like I'm getting a fever."

"It should happen any second . . ."

I stood up, too.

Thunder and Lucha looked at us baffled.

"Together the two of us become an esper team," Yuri told them.

"Esp-esper?"

Thunder's eyes opened wide.

"It's clairvoyance. Together we can see a vision in our minds of something related to the case. That's why the WWWA chose us to be Crime Trouble Consultants."

" . . ."

Thunder was speechless. It was no wonder. A lot of people didn't know of the actual existence of espers. Depending on who you talk to, some might not even consider espers human. No matter how close Yuri and Thunder were as kids, this should close the book on their kindling love affair. Naturally, my chances were squashed, too. After all, this was the fate handed to us. All we can do is give in to it. It's sad, but that's life.

"C'mon, Yuri . . ."

I took Yuri's hand. We moved to the center of the grass. A wave of heat passed through our entire bodies.

Yuri and I stood facing each other. We stretched our palms out so they just met. Our arms slowly rose as if they were being held up by the strings of a puppeteer. Eventually our arms were almost straight up on the air, in a "banzai" pose. Our palms were still touching. Our eyes drifted closed.

Pop . . . there was a flash in the back of my mind. All I could see was white. I felt as if I was floating in an endless space, and my body went numb in a state of ecstasy. It may be nothing, but it was all white.

Then I saw the vision.

It was an island. A beautiful green island. In its center was a giant volcanic crater. Only there was the land barren; the rest of the island was a tropical paradise bathed in vivid greens.

Suddenly the vision was gone.

Color began to return to my senses, and the floating sensation disappeared. I had returned in a powerful daze. My back felt heavy. I tried to force myself to fully wake up, pumping energy into restoring my consciousness.

I opened my eyes. I was a little dizzy, but not too bad.

I was back.

At some point Thunder and Lucha had come close to where we were standing. They wore rather stiff expressions. They were probably thinking they saw something they shouldn't have seen . . .

I began to draw the island I had just seen in the dirt.

"Is this island on Lamier?" Thunder asked in a flash. One of his eyebrows rose up.

"How should I know—?"

"Got it!"

I turned to Yuri. "I'll call Arabel from a pay phone. He should know about the islands on Lamier. Just wait here!"

There was a phone box next to the entrance of the park. My call to him was late, and he was anxious for information. I explained the situation and our current position, and Arabel said he'd pick us up in fifteen minutes.

I hung up and headed back to where the other three were waiting.

Only Yuri jumped up when I got there.

"Where's Thunder and Lucha?" I asked.

"That's the thing . . ." Yuri answered, looking perplexed. "They said they were going to use the bathroom, but they haven't come back . . ."

From Yuri's side, Mugi confirmed her story with a *Mgyow*.

"What?!" I bit my lip. "Idiot! Snookered! We just got played—!"

"Huh?"

Yuri didn't get what I was saying.

"Did you see how Thunder reacted to my drawing?! They know

something about that island. They dumped us so they can enact their revenge!"

"You can't actually . . ."

Yuri looked like she might cry. Moron! Sucker! Dummy! Why do you think they left you here?!

After twelve minutes and forty seconds, Arabel arrived.

After showing him the drawing of the island, he didn't even have to think before speaking.

"That's Saint Dominas Isle. It's about 4200 kilometers south of Topaz City. It sits isolated near the equator."

"South, 4200 kilometers!" I shouted. "That's about how far Bayer's jet was going and back!"

I went on to tell Arabel about what Thunder had explained about Dr. Russell.

"What do you know?" The blood rushed to Arabel's face. "So I was right the whole time. Bayer's, I mean, Dr. Russell's death really wasn't an accident . . ."

At that point Arabel looked as if he had suddenly unearthed an even bigger discovery. He froze, as his brow wrinkled up.

"Dr. Russell . . ." Arabel turned his head and spit. "Dr. Russell . . . I have heard that name somewhere before . . ."

Then he suddenly punched his fist into his hand.

"Dr. Russell!" he yelled. "I remember now! It's Dr. Russell!"

"Who? Who is he—?!"

We braced ourselves as we asked.

"An incredible person . . ." said Arabel. "He's the inventor of the Airspace Crushing Bomb!"

"The Space Smasher?!"

We literally jumped two meters straight into the air. I mean, how many shockers had we heard today? And this one was the biggest one yet. Eventually does your heart get to a point when it doesn't stop every time you hear shocking news?

"Kei!" said Yuri. "Maybe that's why he used an alias when he came to Lamier . . ."

"Right!" I said, showing my excitement in seeing the pieces fall together. "That must be it! Lamier is somehow involved in the Space Smasher case!"

"This-this is a big deal . . ."

Arabel's voice cracked. He seemed upset.

"Mr. Arabel!"

I shouted.

"Ye-yes . . .!"

"Please take us to the space port. And after that immediately contact the United Space Troops and tip them off to what is going on."

"Wha-what are you two going to do?"

"We are going to fly *Lovely Angel* to Saint Dominas Isle. Thunder and Lucha are already headed there. I don't know what we have unleashed, yet!"

"Okay, I see . . ."

"If you got it, then let's hurry and go!"

We made the forty-two-kilometer trip to Bloodstone Port, just outside Topaz City, in five minutes. I'm guessing that's a local record. We were spotted by patrol cars along the way, but I just held my WWSA identification card out the window to let the cops see, and we ended up getting a police escort to the space port.

We hurriedly stampeded onto *Lovely Angel*. Maintenance servicing had been completed, and she was ready for takeoff. Reflecting the twinkling stars in the night sky, the scarlet hull of *Lovely Angel* was a sight to behold. Simply put, she was one stylish ship.

Nose to tail she was eighty meters. The widest point was eighteen meters thick. The front of the ship tapers to a long thin point, and the hull has a shapely, cute form, coming in where the waist would be on a girl. Along the stern are four main rockets, along with four fins of various sizes. I could get into more technical details, but those are the basics.

In the bow of the ship was the bridge. Arabel should have been just about finishing up informing the United Space Troops by now.

Yuri was positioned in the pilot's seat, and I sat to the left in the copilot's seat. Mugi sat in one of the two spare seats behind us. By the numbers we were just a small eighty-meter-class space ship, but we had upgraded to the cruising and battle strength of a two hundred-meter-class destroyer, and so the space on the bridge was limited to a four-person maximum. Nevertheless, for us, two of those seats were spares.

The engine wasn't quite perfectly calibrated, and a rhythmic jostling under our feet had begun. Up on the main screen was projected a bird's eye view of the space port. I could clearly see the vivid colors of the scores of ships of all shapes and sizes lined up for departure.

We were approved for takeoff by the space-traffic controller.

"Here we go!" Yuri called out. All right! Let's go!

Lovely Angel lifted off.

Our rockets scorched the takeoff pad, and cut through the atmosphere with a terrific roar. All the real-time image screens were blacked out. *Lovely Angel* only has emergency use windows. We can normally see what's going on with the dozens of panel screens inlaid in the walls. Consequently, we are at the mercy of the computer-generated images to see what is happening outside the ship.

The images of the stratosphere were restored. *Lovely Angel* gained more and more altitude, and briefly entered orbit around Lamier before we would reenter the atmosphere in order to descend on her intended target of Saint Dominas Isle. Less than six hundred seconds to destination. What a fast trip!

We reentered successfully. We were at an altitude of eight thousand meters. The screens started flickering to life. The sun was just beginning to crack the horizon. Between the white clouds we could see the gorgeous ocean spread out below us. In the center of it all was Saint Dominas Isle.

"Altitude six thousand . . ."

Yuri began a count. I read a screen that gave me a real-time scale. It was eighty-six kilometers to Saint Dominas.

"So what should we do?" asked Yuri. She had lost the drawl. "Should we just head straight on to the airspace above the island?"

"Let's do this . . ." I started. "About thirty kilos out it might not be a bad idea to take a swing around so we can check out the situation . . ."

"Sure. That's probably the best plan, I guess . . ."

Yuri didn't sound as confident as her words. It was then that it happened.

From a corner of the island we could see two, no, three bright flashes.

The computer started flashing warnings.

"Kei!" Yuri screamed in a painfully high octave. "Missiles!"

chapter 7

what are you saying, lady?

There were six missiles launched all together. They were combination infra-red and laser-guided ECM rockets, and they were the kind that hurt when they hit. The best defense is a good offense, right?

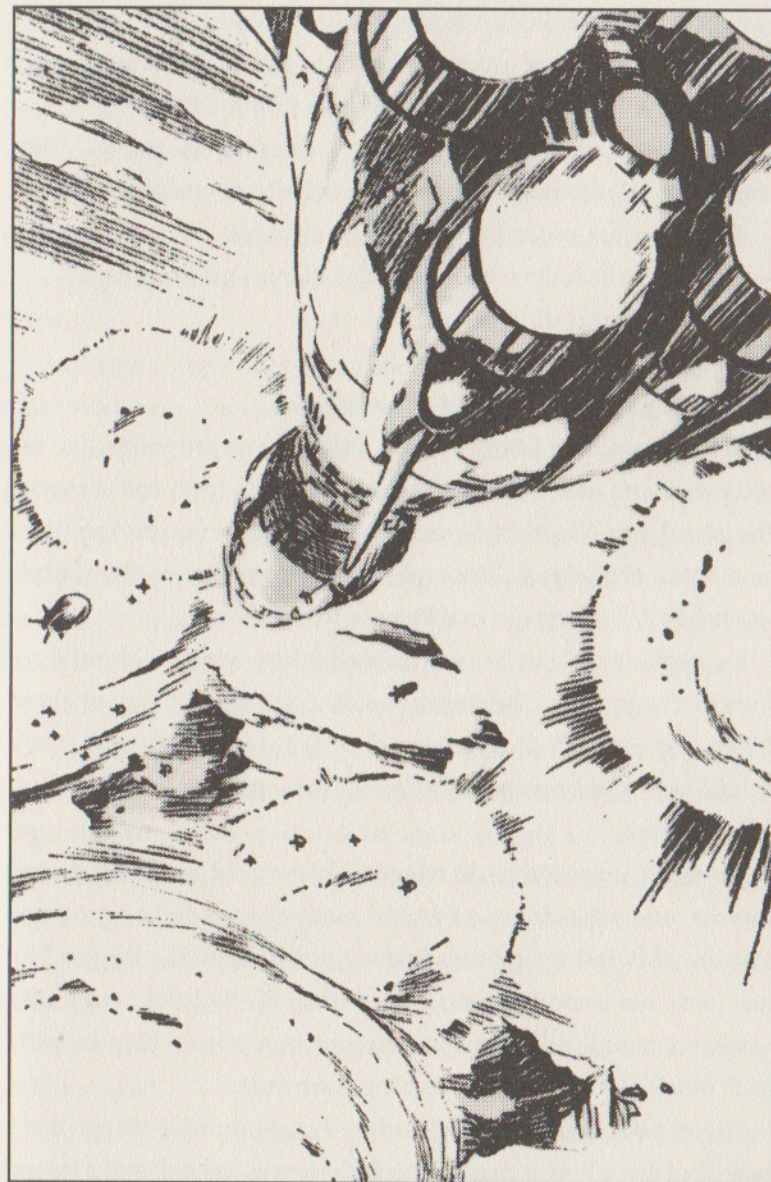
I grabbed onto the console's laser trigger. I would get to the anti-missiles in a minute.

"Distance: eleven thousand . . ."

Yuri counted off the numbers. They were within range. Unlike most spaceships, it was easy for us to knock missiles out of the air.

I squeezed the trigger.

Pyapa! An orange fireball soared into the air. In the vast pinkish early morning sky the ball opened up in a huge spectacular display. The laser guidance systems were powerless against this giant fireball flower. Didn't they know you can't throw up second-rate potshots and expect to lay a scratch on a peerless fighter like the Taidoko-class *Lovely Angel*?



All together the six missiles broke apart into gas and scraps.

"Let's forget going around!" I said to Yuri. "If this is the way they want it, let's get down and mount a ground attack!"

"But we don't know where we are trying to get to!" Yuri protested. "Without a scout, that is totally irresponsible!"

"Irresponsible, my ass!" I blurted out with force. "On an island this size, there is a technique in pulling off a blanket ground attack."

"What are you talking about?"

"Game Genocide!"

"Agh!" Yuri slumped over the console.

In the meantime, *Lovely Angel's* altitude was dropping, and we were drawing near Saint Dominas Isle. Again, from one corner of the island, missiles were launched. This time there were ten times as many rockets fired. These missiles were smaller, with multiple warheads. Whatever—nyaa! You are too slow!

Each missile split in five warheads, for a sum total of about three hundred warheads. They were steadily coming our way at about Mach five. Steadily didn't mean slow. If I were to describe it in a sound, it would be something like Ka-swoosh!

"Dammit!"

I opened up the missile trigger. This would release the anti-missile, and after doing so would mean we needed to get some distance. I flexed my pointer finger and squeezed the trigger. Not just once, but a second, then a third time. We had our own multi-warhead missiles. Designed to induce explosions, they initially took out about half of the incoming warheads.

"Keep your chin up!" Yuri suddenly called out. *Let's get 'em!* I was thinking when at that moment, there was a shock and a boom.

A five-G punch to the side. *Lovely Angel* had turned to avoid the warheads, but didn't detect that one. Ooo . . . my chin hurts, my neck hurts.

The screen following the missiles had gone white. It was now a fierce battle of warhead vs. warhead. Even with these small warheads, the sheer number of them assembled meant that the total damage possible was enormous.

Gulp!

Once again, there was an ominous boom. *Lovely Angel* did another steep turn. This was bad. I wasn't thinking straight. Maybe it just wasn't my lucky day. It had only been a few minutes since daybreak, but I didn't want it to start like this.

Around twenty of the warheads thrown off course turned and made a wide arc, and were coming back our way. They would have to be stopped with the laser. I lined up my numb chin and neck with the laser's targeting sites, and I squeezed the trigger.

One by one the warheads were instantly blown to bits.

We were unavoidably forced to take a detour, and *Lovely Angel* found herself in the skies far above Saint Dominas Isle. If we tried to go straight onto the island, we could expect an even more vicious missile attack, but if we were to come at the island along the coastline, covered in foliage, we could have a better shot.

"Get back and drop altitude!" I said. "Really drop her down! Under five hundred meters—"

"You know you're nuts, right?" Yuri had grown tired. "We'll stall that low!"

"We can't stall!" I pleaded to no one in particular. "We need to get above Mach five. Do whatever you can! We are low on

missiles, so if I am going to do my Game Genocide, I'm going to need the help of a sonic boom."

Yuri screamed, obviously not thrilled with my plan. I could understand that. During that recent job on Dangle and that space station that fell to the planet . . . with a sonic boom half the continent was destroyed and over 1.2 million lives were lost. It was natural to not want to hear a sonic boom ever again.

But hearing one and making one were two different things. And now, we needed to make one. With *Lovely Angel's* mass, major damage wouldn't be an issue. If we went off our flight path at that speed, we would just end up plowing a trench about one hundred meters long and five or six meters deep into the ground. At this point, I would have liked to have just sent the entire island to the bottom of the sea, but that wasn't an option right now.

I brought up a view of the ocean on the screen. We were very close to the water. Close enough that if I could have stuck my hand out the hull, it would have gotten wet. This was some real low-altitude flying. Like this . . .

The surface of the sea began to divide. Literally it was like the ocean was being cut into two. Like Charlton Heston and the Red Sea. Getting closer to the island, the water was getting shallower, and this combined with our altitude was causing the water to split. In places you could almost see the sea floor. The tremendous force of a sonic boom. No sign of any missiles from the island since the multi-warhead attack. This was our big chance.

We reached the shore. Sand was blown into the air, the ground was flattened, and rock formations cracked. The dirt and sand thrown up under *Lovely Angel's* hull made an effective smoke

screen. Looking at an outside view screen, all I could see was an ochre clay color. I couldn't make out any distinct objects.

In fact, I was sure we had just passed by the point where the missiles had launched from. The computer confirmed my suspicion of the location. At a glance, it looked like an ordinary cliff. As we passed, rocks and boulders tumbled down the side of the steep wall. Among the falling debris I could see the reflection of shiny metallic objects. The damage to the cliff was more than our sonic boom could muster, there had been another explosion. Bingo! Take that!

Lovely Angel traveled further inland. With a circumference of about thirty kilometers, this was a modest little island. At this speed, you could blink and miss it. We turned toward the giant crater in the island's center. Below us was a green tropical rain forest on all sides. You could build a base or residence out here and no one would ever know.

Despite our maneuvering, a laser blast hit *Lovely Angel* in the belly, scorching her outer panels. A red light on the edge of the console began to flash, indicating hull damage. It was from an anti-aircraft laser cannon. Fortunately, the damage was minimal. However, there was no mistake they knew we were here. I wrapped my finger around the trigger once again. There were a considerable number of anti-aircraft laser cannons hidden in the tropical forest, and bright beams came randomly streaming from the greenery toward us. How do you fight a battle like this? The answer is Super Napalm.

I set the coordinates in all directions and punched the release button. Small bursts of napalm ejected to the input locations of the

first laser cannon bunkers. From where we were, I was able to catch a glimpse of a few of the antiaircraft laser cannons. Each one turned to a mass of flame. Fireballs borne from the sky. They drew an arc in the air before falling. The primeval forest began to burn. They weren't direct hits, but with no chance for fire extinguishing, the laser cannons soon were enveloped in raging flames. Of course, some of the napalm landed right on their targets.

I was alternating between blasting down missiles and dropping Super Napalm. Here and there surface-to-air missiles were taking flight at us, but I took care of them using the laser. I was looking forward to taking on an interceptor, but none had shown up. Overall it was a pretty weak welcome. Except for the lack of dogfights, this was exactly like a session of Game Genocide.

We came out over the south sea. I had just finished cleaning out the west half of the island. Over the ocean, I circled around, and moved north on course with the east side of the island. Plumes of black smoke rose from a number of places on the island. On the surface the power of the Super Napalm's fire was clear.

"They don't seem to have any response," Yuri stated. She was right. Compared with the initial missile attacks, the antiaircraft lasers were all bark and no bite.

We were close to the coastline again. *Lovely Angel's* altitude slowly got lower.

And that's when it happened.

We were being hailed. Visual communication.

I flipped a screen on. On the tiny communication screen a woman appeared. She was an older woman wearing what looked like a khaki military uniform. She was probably in her mid to late thirties.

She had a piercing look in her eyes, and a slim build. She came across as intellectual and frigid. Her hair was a reddish-blond color. She had gray eyes. I had a feeling we had met somewhere before.

"You two are the famous Dirty Pair, am I right . . . ?" said the woman. She had a deep, chilly voice. "I have heard some war stories."

"It's a pleasure—" I responded. "You are the organized crime syndicate Lucifer, correct?"

"Dear me . . ." The woman laughed out of the side of her mouth. "I thought you were only good at blowing things up, but I also see you have a powerful imagination."

"Ha ha ha," I laughed, unphased. "To kill Lamier's most powerful man, Standalf, assume his authority, and then to take over this solitary island as your own base . . . such bold actions could only be done by one large crime organization, and that's Lucifer, no doubt."

"You seem to have it all figured out. All the ducks are in a little row—" the woman conceded. What do you know? My guess was a home run. "But let's get back to that game a little later. For now I want you to raise up and fly your ship around this island."

"What did you say. . . ?!"

Just when I was about to blow this case wide open, and she calls our hard work a "game." She pushed my buttons a little too hard.

I responded again, in a shrill voice.

"Or you could just surrender right now! This ship can turn your entire island into a floating lump of charcoal, and I've already alerted the United Space Force!"

"Well, aren't you the courageous one . . ."

"Shut your trap!" I shouted even louder. I couldn't stand

sarcasm . . . "If that's how you want it, we are going to fry your entire island right now! Get ready!"

"Now, please wait a moment—" The woman gave a composed laugh again. "We have Space Smashers here. If you act hastily, you could be releasing infinitely more power than you intend to. You might want to rethink your strategy."

Gulp!

I choked. What a dirty . . . Space Smashers she said! Throwing those into the conversation! What a slimy way to play . . .

"No matter how many people have died due to Dirty Pair screw-ups, I don't think you are prepared to take the responsibility of killing seven million tourists, now are you?" she said in a voice that could have come from the bowels of the planet.

"After you take a lap around the island, I will send you landing coordinates!" she continued. "Then I want you to touch down. Oh, and how rude of me. My name is Isabella. After you land I'll invite you up to my castle."

Cough!

I clenched my jaw, and helplessly nodded my head, while Yuri, in faith, brought *Lovely Angel* around and began a turn around the island, as instructed. We got up to three thousand meters. If they really had Space Smashers, then we really had no other choice than to do what she said. Dammit! I should have anticipated something like this.

We received the coordinates by laser transmission. We were told to land just east of the center of the island. The landing spot was inside the volcanic crater. Damn, if only we had swept the east half of the island first!

The stern of *Lovely Angel* dipped down and we prepared for landing. I had one hand on the laser trigger and the other on the missile launch trigger, in case there was some sort of trouble, but the enemy remained quiet. It looked like they really were going to let us land. Maybe they planned to hold us hostage to the United Space Force.

As we descended into the crater a huge man-made structure came into our field of vision. It was made completely of volcanic rock and dirt, no sign of any vegetation anywhere. It was the same reddish-brown color as its surroundings. From far away it was unnoticeable. That was some camouflage.

This was Isabella's castle, as she called it. It was built in a spectacular Middle Ages style. It rose from the crater floor at a breathtaking scale. The highest tower was very possibly over two hundred meters tall. About one kilometer from the castle was a flat plain with a single landing pad.

Lovely Angel slowly lowered her altitude. An uncomfortable-looking Mugi began to let out a low growl from the spare seat. I-I wanted like to let out a growl myself!

On one screen something was moving. It was small. Turning up the magnification I could see that it was a small submarine jet. It was a combination of a submarine and a jet plane. A really unusual sight. We were at twenty or thirty meters above the surface. It felt as if we were crawling into the ground. Suddenly one section of the castle opened up. A large scale laser gun turret slowly revealed itself. What was going on? I was wondering when the laser cannon spit out an energy beam. The target was the submarine jet. So that was an enemy of Isabella?

Several bursts were shot, all focused on the submarine jet. If the jet didn't do something, it was toast! I covered my eyes—and then what happened?! Probably the laser blew the submarine jet into a million pieces. Actually the sparkling light-blue submarine jet took off forward. A barrier! I couldn't believe it, the submarine jet was equipped with a laser barrier.

"Yuri, hover!" I said to Yuri. Whoever this was, he was putting on quite a show. We couldn't properly follow our original instructions to touch down, and we held a position at an eight-hundred-meter altitude.

"Yuri!"

We suddenly heard a man's voice.

"Kya!"

We shook with surprise. Someone was using the channel we had left open when communicating with Isabella.

"Yuri!"

There was a visual. It was a man's face. Cou-could it be? It was Thunder! Wasn't it Thunder? Over his shoulder we could see Lucha. They were in a really narrow space. Some sort of cockpit . . . No way . . . inside the submarine jet?!

"Strike the castle, Yuri!" Thunder said, almost screaming. Yuri this and Yuri that . . . Hello! Aren't you forgetting somebody? Humph! "Now's your chance! The Space Smashers are stacked up in there, and they aren't activated. She's got no battlefield smarts. We gotta barrier, so they can't get us. But we can't attack neither. Go get 'em, Yuri! Knock that castle into the ground!"

"Yup!" Yuri answered. "I'm all over it!"

She looked over her shoulder.

"Hammer in some missiles!" she shouted.

Hey, hey! I was being ignored, but I knew when it was time to do my job.

I lined up with the castle wall as well as three spaceships, and launched our last remaining missiles. I didn't hold back. The United Space Force should be here any time.

The three spaceships were blown to pieces, and the rampart was now half rubble.

"Yuri, let's get low!" I said. "We can use handjets to fly into the castle and nab Isabella!"

"Okay!"

I launched a fire-extinguishing shell to put out the fire and we let *Lovely Angel* hover above the launch pad.

Mugi, who until now had been quietly grumbling, jumped from his seat and was ready for action. He usually was never this hyper.

With handjets strapped to our backs, we opened the bow's emergency hatch. We fired up the jets and first Yuri took off from the hatch into the air, with me right behind her.

And then I couldn't believe what happened . . .

"Gyaaon!"

With a single cry, Mugi jumped from the hatch—a good eighty meters above the surface of the crater.

"Aah!"

As I swallowed my breath, I watch Mugi fall to the ground in a straight path.

"Mugi!"

Steering the handjets, we followed after him. Hitting the ground he sprang into a high-speed sprint. Really high speed. Darting between rock formations, I couldn't keep track of him.

I wasn't sure if we should focus on Mugi or find Isabella. But at that moment, humanity's crisis came first. Grudgingly I changed course back to our original direction, and entered through the opening in the castle wall.

chapter 8

haven't you had enough? just give up already

Crossing through the smashed wall, I found myself standing inside the castle garden.

I removed the handjet from my back, and pulled my heatgun from my hip. Yuri did the same, though she was carrying a ray gun. Carefully, we examined our immediate surroundings, and headed through the courtyard into the depths of the castle. The inside of the castle was much more modern looking than the outside. There were illumination panels in the ceiling, and the floors and walls were made of plastic.

Yuri and I walked forward with our bodies pressed tightly against the wall. There was no one else around.

"Which way you thinkin'?" Yuri blurted out. Sometimes her country roots revealed themselves when she talked.

"Hold on!"

From my pocket I pulled out a small, flat device. It was a little thicker than the Bloody Card, but a little smaller. An energy

detector. I had brought it along, just in case of a situation like this. It was designed to sniff out locations using large amounts of energy.

I flicked the detector switch on. Beep, beep, beep, beep . . . it sounded, and lit up. Good boy . . . I didn't know where it was, but there was a high-consumption energy area nearby. That's where we needed to go.

"Yuri, this way."

I started to move first, and we had to practically crawl to get through the first passageway. Plastic walls and floors may be flexible, but don't exactly accommodate a quiet passage for people wearing three-inch heels.

We hit a four-way intersection in the passageway. On the wall closest to us was a confusing LCD screen. It looked like a map to every hallway and room, but the surface was covered with so many symbols, I couldn't begin to make sense of it. On it there were red and yellow lights flashing. I didn't know what that meant, either. It was clear that my detector was going to come in handy. At this crossroad, the detector indicated left. Right then we were basked in the light of a barrage of laser fire. Black holes were burned into the walls and floor, and sparks were flying off the exposed electrical wiring. It was an ambush. A broadside attack from twenty heavily armed soldiers. One shot grazed my shoulder, and part of my reinforced polymer suit evaporated into the air.

"Yowch!"

I was enraged. You leave a scratch on this body, and there's hell to pay. Yuri grabbed the belt wrapped around my shorts and pulled me to the wall.



"It's too dangerous!" Yuri shouted. "Take a look around!"

Indeed, the hallway was full of laser fire. Pyu! Pyu! The LCD display we were just looking at had been blown to bits. It was a miracle I was still standing. I must admit, I owed Yuri one for that. I hate that. Instead of being thankful, I got overbearing.

"You don't need to tell me that! Instead of blabbering, why don't you pull out the Bloody Card?! We can't go anywhere until we clean up that hallway!"

Yuri sulked. "What did I do?" she snapped back. "We gotta get it together, or we are dead!"

Pyu-shun!

The floor in front of our feet was scorched. That was from a powerful energy beam. We jumped and got our backs to the wall. We got low to the ground and peeked around the corner.

Gulp!

I bit my lip.

From across the intersection ten new soldiers were coming our way. Crap! The two of us versus thirty of them were not the balanced odds I was hoping for. On top of that, we are just a couple of weak girls! We could have waited patiently for the United Space Force to arrive, but this was getting a little too heavy.

"Go around the corner and throw to the left!" I yelled to Yuri. We didn't have time for petty arguments now.

"Hmph!"

With the Bloody Card slipped between two fingers of her right hand, Yuri and I switched places. Laser blasts from the ten troops barely missed Yuri's body. We were defenseless. All I could do was get down on the floor. Leaning around the corner, Yuri sent the

Bloody Card into flight. She was met with dozens of laser blasts, and Yuri quickly rolled back to relative safety.

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow . . ." she squealed. She must have been hit somewhere. By itself, the reinforced polymer suit wasn't a great defense. We should have worn our metallite alloy space suits.

"Yuri!" I called to her. She was lying on the floor belly down and controlling the Bloody Card with the handheld transmitter. She was flying blind, so we couldn't see the results of her efforts.

"Let's go to the right-hand corridor!"

"Right?" Yuri asked, turning around. We couldn't counterattack, and the troops were probably only ten meters or so away by now. We had to do something now.

"We go right!" I said while pointing the heatgun at the advancing soldiers and shot. Because the heatgun is a short-range weapon, it would only really serve as a warning. But it was a lot better than nothing.

"Before the hallway to the right you can see where *Lovely Angel's* missile hit. It's all falling apart. If we can jump into there, maybe we can hold out until the Space Force arrives."

"Huwaal!"

Yuri was frantically pushing buttons on the transmitter. Streaking a faint silver tail, the Bloody Card flew around behind the advancing soldiers, and then came back toward us through the troop.

The moment the blood started spraying and we heard astonished shouts, we jumped up from the floor. We pitched forward across the corridor and rolled. Since the Bloody Card had disappeared, the survivors in the left-hand corridor returned, recklessly

shooting off their lasers. I borrowed Yuri's ray gun and returned fire. I couldn't get a clear shot, but it had a better range than the heatgun. We rushed down the right-hand corridor to a small electric car turned on its side. Behind it was a mountain of rubble. In other words, we were in a dead end. So this would have to be our final fortress. By my calculations, the United Space Force should swoop in to rescue us in twenty maybe thirty minutes tops. An hour might be tough, but for half that time we could conceivably make it using the electric car as a shield. Damn . . . even doing that, if Mugi could cover us, this battle would be a little easier . . . Oh, I shouldn't complain!

Yuri briefly called back the Bloody Card. Living up to its name, the card was dripping red. It looked like it really gave its all.

"This is a problem . . ." said Yuri. "There are still about fifteen of them left."

"This could be it for us . . ."

Typical of me, I adopted Yuri's pessimistic outlook. We were short on equipment, Mugi wasn't here, our positioning was terrible—it was not an enviable situation. At least we couldn't be attacked from more than one side, if that's your idea of good news.

"Kei!" Yuri tapped me on my back.

"They're coming!"

"Uwaa!"

Hiding behind the electric car, I quickly peeked to see. Hya! Bad guys crawling toward us. Hey, you are going to get your clothes dirty! Stop it!

"They're not going to stop, stupid!" Yuri called from behind me. I guess I said my thoughts out loud. No, they weren't going to

stop, were they?

"They're too low for the Bloody Card to work," said Yuri. "We are going to have to get them with our ray gun and heatgun—"

"Can we take another thirty minutes of this?"

I adjusted the settings on the heatgun.

"Let's just do whatever we can!"

Yuri's ray gun sent out a flash. I also pulled the trigger. Lying on their stomachs, the soldiers also shot their laser guns blindly.

It turned into a fierce shoot-out. The ground was blackened, the walls melted in places, the electric car was torn to pieces. We had the enemy where we wanted them, in a defenseless position, but they seemed to be wearing some kind of special uniform. It resisted high temperatures. We could still use the ray gun, but even a direct hit from the heatgun was meaningless in this battle. Another check against us.

After ten minutes the battle still carried on. We had cut down ten of their soldiers. However, the space between us and them was down to less than ten meters, and the electric car could barely be called a shield any longer.

"We're in deep trouble . . ." Yuri tossed out.

"This is it . . ."

I stopped shooting.

The soldiers seemed to notice this, and pulled their laser guns to their hips and started to stand up. We could probably shoot and kill two of them now, but that would be it. They lumbered closer. Then, two or three loud bangs came from the light panels above. They were burning and coming loose. The soldiers stopped in their tracks.

Then all of a sudden something strange happened.

With a mighty roar, the ceiling came crashing down.

Spouting surprised shouts, the soldiers moved back. But they were too late. Six or seven of them were hammered by falling chunks of concrete, knocking them to the ground. The two or three standing soldiers tripped and fell over the fallen blocks. There was a giant hole in the ceiling, and the ground was covered in debris.

"What in the world?" Yuri and I said at the same time. It was still too early to expect the United Space Force. Two shadows jumped down from the hole in the ceiling. Both were wearing black space jackets.

"Thunder! Lucha!" Yuri said in an encouraged voice. Our brother and sister team were back. But weren't they riding in the submarine jet? How did they get here? First they disappear, and then reappear. Something about it I didn't like. I mean, weren't we supposed to be the stars of the show?!

Lucha and Thunder collected the surviving soldiers and injected them in the arms with something from a pistol-shaped needleless injector. The soldiers went limp. Some kind of anesthesia it seemed. They then picked up a couple of dropped laser guns and tossed them our way.

"What are you guys doing here . . . ?" Yuri asked, stunned. Lucha answered Yuri's question, briskly stepping close to Yuri and flipping up her collar. There was a tiny oscillator pinned to her shirt there.

"Back in the park in Topaz City . . . when you two were seeing the vision, I pinned this on you," Lucha said.

"You must be kidding me!"

Yuri was frustrated. Removing the oscillator she pushed it onto Lucha.

"Not to change the subject . . ." Thunder said turning to me. "Do you know where Isabella could be?"

"I am not sure if it's working or not, but I did bring along an energy detector," I answered. "If Isabella is really the boss here, then this should help us find her."

"Then let's go!" said Thunder. "Show me the way!"

"But, if . . ."

The corners of my mouth moved down.

"What's wrong?" Thunder wondered aloud.

"I can show you, and since you helped us out, I can't say this strongly, but . . ." I said in a disappointed tone. "You two lied to us, didn't you?"

"Uh . . ." Thunder's eyes immediately dropped to the floor, and a sad look came over his face. Don't give me that look! He looked like I had scolded him in front of the entire class.

"Sorry . . ." Thunder's head drooped. "We knew about the Space Smashers and what Dr. Russell was trying to do here . . ."

"What do you mean, what he was trying to do here?" I asked Thunder.

"We don't have time—" Yuri interrupted. "I have the detector, so let's talk and walk at the same time."

Yuri was right. We climbed over the rubble in the corridor and started heading deeper into the castle.

Soon after we started walking, Thunder voluntarily started speaking. "What us guys knew came after Dr. Russell died . . . It was written in the Doc's will."

"..."

"When the Doc found out that his invention, the Space Smasher, was being used by terrorists, and that it hurt so many people, he felt just terrible—I mean, he had only invented it, but the Doc's heart was just torn to bits.

"You know, it was being used as a weapon of mass destruction. The Doc just got more and more down . . . and us guys could tell he was hurtin' then . . ."

Thunder paused, and for just a brief moment he remained silent.

As if fate timed itself, waiting for a break in Thunder's story, we heard Ka-boom! . . . the sound of an explosion from far off. Up in front, Yuri frantically looked left and right so fast I thought her head might become unglued.

"The United Space Force!" said Yuri. "It must be! They've begun their strike on the island!"

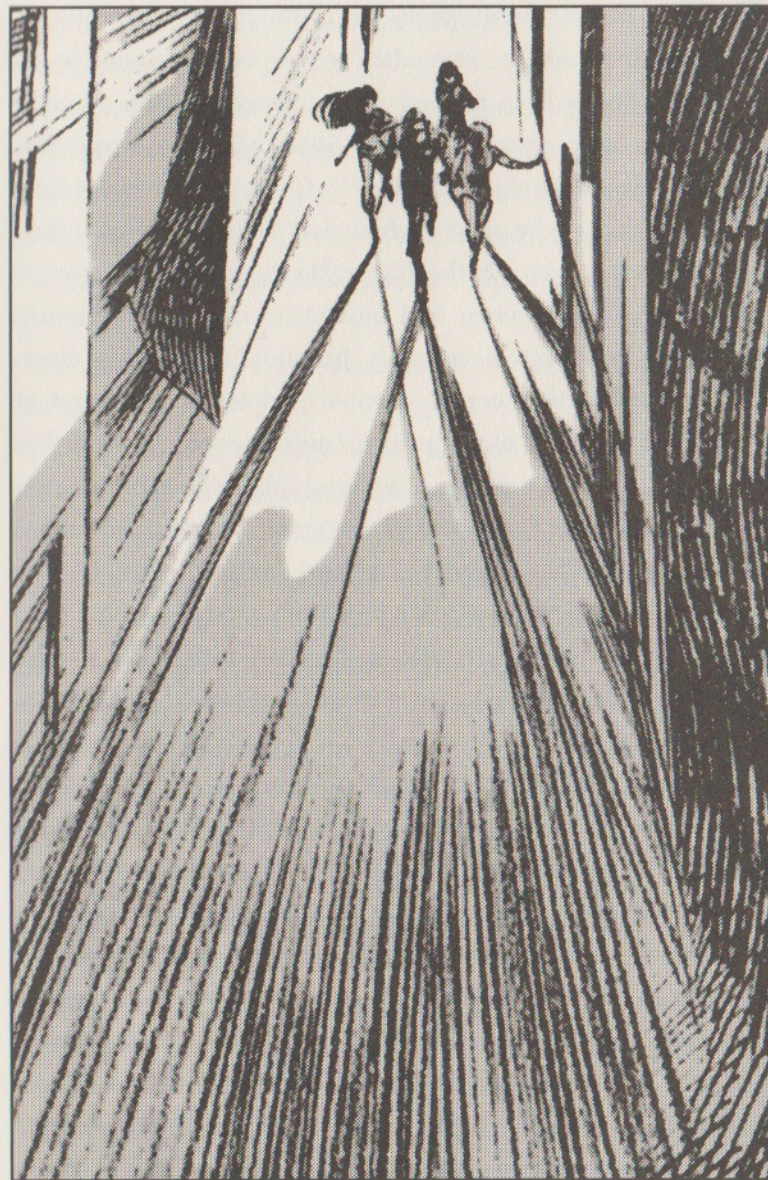
If it was true, then this was good news. The Space Force would keep the bad guys busy. However, if this got in our way of moving forward, like what had just happened, then it would be better if they were attacking far off.

Realizing we should pick up the pace, we began half-running. Our steps echoed in the corridor.

"Say, Thunder . . ." I said, doing my best to keep up with him. "Real simple, can you tell me about what the doctor's will said? That's the fastest way."

"Oh . . ."

Thunder nodded. He was quiet in thought for two or three seconds. He then began to speak about Dr. Russell's will. This is what he told me.



Once Dr. Russell found out that someone else was manufacturing Space Smashers, he immediately jumped to action. He did everything he could to research how a Space Smasher could be made again. The specs on building Space Smashers was erased from the memory banks of the Central Computer, so at that time, the one person in the galaxy who could make one should have been the doctor, and only the doctor. He made a request to a private investigation agency, and movement of parts, electronics devices, and radioactive materials that could be used in a Space Smasher construction were researched completely. In the end, all paths led to Lamier. It took the doctor over five months of hard investigation to piece together how the shipping lines of phantom trading companies, unregistered transport vessels, contraband movers, and the like crossed over here. During that time there were more Space Smasher strikes, three new capital cities had been annihilated, and the death toll was over ten million. Yet, despite all that, somehow the doctor was able to root out the source of the underground plans.

Dr. Russell took off to Lamier almost immediately. He had sent his new invention, the Space Smasher nullifying device, the "Anti-Smasher," as well as special barrier equipment and a submarine jet to Lamier special delivery. You reap what you sow. That was the doctor's policy. And so, the doctor shed his well-known given name for an alias, and borrowed the name Bayer from a long-time missing acquaintance.

"This is . . ." Thunder continued, ". . . what the doctor wrote in his final will papers. I ask this of Thunder, who reads these words. I only finished half of my mission. But this is a mission that can't

go uncompleted. If not, the future of humanity will be left in the hands of demons.

"Thunder, go to Lamier. Destroy the Space Smasher plant! The only person who can complete this mission, which I couldn't if you are reading this, is you. The police and United Space Force will be of no use. If they are involved, the secrets behind the Space Smasher are sure to be made public. If that happens, the human race is doomed.

"Thunder, take the Anti-Smasher I left behind, and finish what I have started.

"I can't ask you to complete this task for the sake of humanity, I ask you to take on this dangerous task for me. Thunder, pick up where I have fallen . . . please. This is my final request.

"To my beloved children, Thunder and Lucha—Fon Russell"

Thunder finished his story in a weakened voice, and then fell quiet. Biting his lip, he looked straight ahead, silently his legs carried him. His eyes welled with tears, and his tanned face was as stolid as an unpolished stone. It was the form of a man not willing to allow his body to succumb to the whims of emotion. I-I wish I could do that . . .

With a deep exhale, Thunder continued.

"Us guys, we never read anything so, well, so sad in our whole lives . . ."

Naturally. That must have been true.

"Thunder . . . ?" I called out. "What I am trying to figure out is why would Dr. Russell throw away an enviable position like the Union Director General of the Science and Technology Agency, and go into seclusion in a remote star system like Maleenay?

I mean, almost nobody knew he was living there."

Thunder's tear-soaked eyes turned to me. Oh! My spine . . . getting weak!

"The father of the Space Smasher couldn't stand his demon child, and wanted to shed his old self, to be around beautiful nature and simple folks—to live like a normal person, and so he chose Maleenay," said Thunder. "Maleenay is rural country. Us guys that are from there are country folks. But now us country folks got somethin' to be proud of. We got us a backbone."

"Dr. Russell pointed that out to us guys."

"Carrying an unbearable burden, just by coincidence Dr. Russell found the true meaning of humanity on a far away plot of land—the remote star cluster, Maleenay."

I let out a deep breath.

"Kei!" Yuri called out. As we were engrossed in the Dr. Russell conversation, I hadn't noticed that Yuri had gotten about ten meters ahead of us. The corridor remained occupied by our party only. Frankly, it didn't really feel like an enemy hideout.

Getting a little time alone with Thunder was all I wanted, but I picked up the pace to catch up to Yuri's location. She was holding the energy detector high over her head.

"What're you doin'?" I asked. Oop, ouch. I had picked up Maleenay dialect. How the hell did that happen?

"Over there—"

She pointed her left index finger at a door positioned diagonally across from us. The corridor we were in branched into three hallways. Where the wall split, a very normal-looking door stood.

"Show me the detector—"

Yuri handed me the energy detector. I wanted to check the meter reading. Looking at the needle, there was no mistake. Without question, it was telling us that beyond that door lay a very big source of energy.

However . . .

I felt a sense of dread. Maybe this room just held some kind of generator. It may not have been a control room. I mean, shouldn't there have been guards patrolling in front of a control room? We should have at least run into someone around here. We had gone the wrong way.

"So now what?"

Yuri looked me in the eyes and asked, Now what? That's funny, you asking me . . .

"We're here, so let's go in and take a look," I said. "If it is just a power room, let's blow it up, and cut the enemy off from that much power."

"Sounds like a plan," Thunder agreed. On this action, we all shared the same opinion.

We stood on either side of the exceptionally large door.

Without a sound, I cracked it open.

We advanced inside.

The door shut behind us.

I took a look around the room. It was a fairly large space. More than twenty meters to the back wall. It was even wider than it was deep. And it was completely empty. There was one desk, one sofa, and that was it. With its stark white walls, the room was rather bright. The walls to the left and right were exactly the same. The only thing different was the back wall. This wall wasn't made of

the same white plastic material. It looked like panels covering some gigantic piece of equipment. There were meters and levers and dials lighting up all over. It had an ominous-looking, shiny black face.

But what captured our attention more was the slim woman in a khaki military uniform.

"So, you finally made it . . ." the woman said quietly, with a complicated look on her face.

This was Isabella.

chapter 9

we are all going down together, with a bang!

"I purposely led you here . . ." Isabella continued. She held a small horsewhip in her right hand. From where I could see, she had no other weapons.

"What the hell are you trying to say?" I snapped, trying to prod her. You old bitch, don't mistake us for trained monkeys that will eat out of your hand!

"Soon this base will be destroyed," said Isabella. She was unaffected by the tone in my voice. Her speech remained soft and quiet. "The United Space Force will use more force than needed, but this castle wasn't designed to withstand that kind of attack."

"So what, what do you want?" I asked pointedly. "Are you surrendering?"

"Not on your life!"

Isabella's response echoed. She had a strong personality. This might not be good for us. Maybe I was just worried about that whip.

"Members of Lucifer don't surrender," she followed up. "Success, or death. Those are the only paths."

"Then . . . What?!"

I had lost all patience. Damn, and I was trying to look superior, too—

"I wanted to meet Thunder and Lucha . . . and you two as well . . ." Isabella stated, gesturing to the brother and sister. The nerve! Adding us in like an afterthought . . . "You were the adopted children of Dr. Russell, former Maleenay Central Police detective Thunder, and policewoman Lucha . . . I've waited a long time to finally make your acquaintance."

"Who-who are you?!" Thunder blurted out yelling, his face looked confused and distressed. His sister, Lucha's face had gone white as a sheet.

"Well, I am Isabella . . ." she said. "Dr. Russell's real daughter—"

"Wha—?" "Erp!" "Ack!" "Kaff!"

We were all struck speechless. In shock, not one of us could even muster a breath. But having heard what she said, that face, those eyes, could it be—But—!

"It's a lie!" Thunder shouted. Lucha held onto his arm. Thunder's face was burning red.

"It's a lie!" Thunder said again, "There is no way in the galaxy you could be Dr. Russell's daughter. Lucifer is a bond of blood. How would the daughter of Dr. Russell from Elckian join Lucifer? A little peon, maybe, but one of the top dogs? Us guys might be country folks, so you think you can fool us. You can't pull one on us that easy!"

"My father, Russell, was a researching monster . . ." Isabella's eyes got distant and seemed to lose focus. She looked as if she was watching a dream. "Even though he was the Science and Technology Agency's Director General, a management position, he was always, always in the research lab. Sometimes he wouldn't come home for days at a time . . ."

"..."

Not a peep came from us as we listened to Isabella's story.

"And on the occasions he did come home, all he did was fight with Mother . . . they constantly quarreled and really seemed to hate each other."

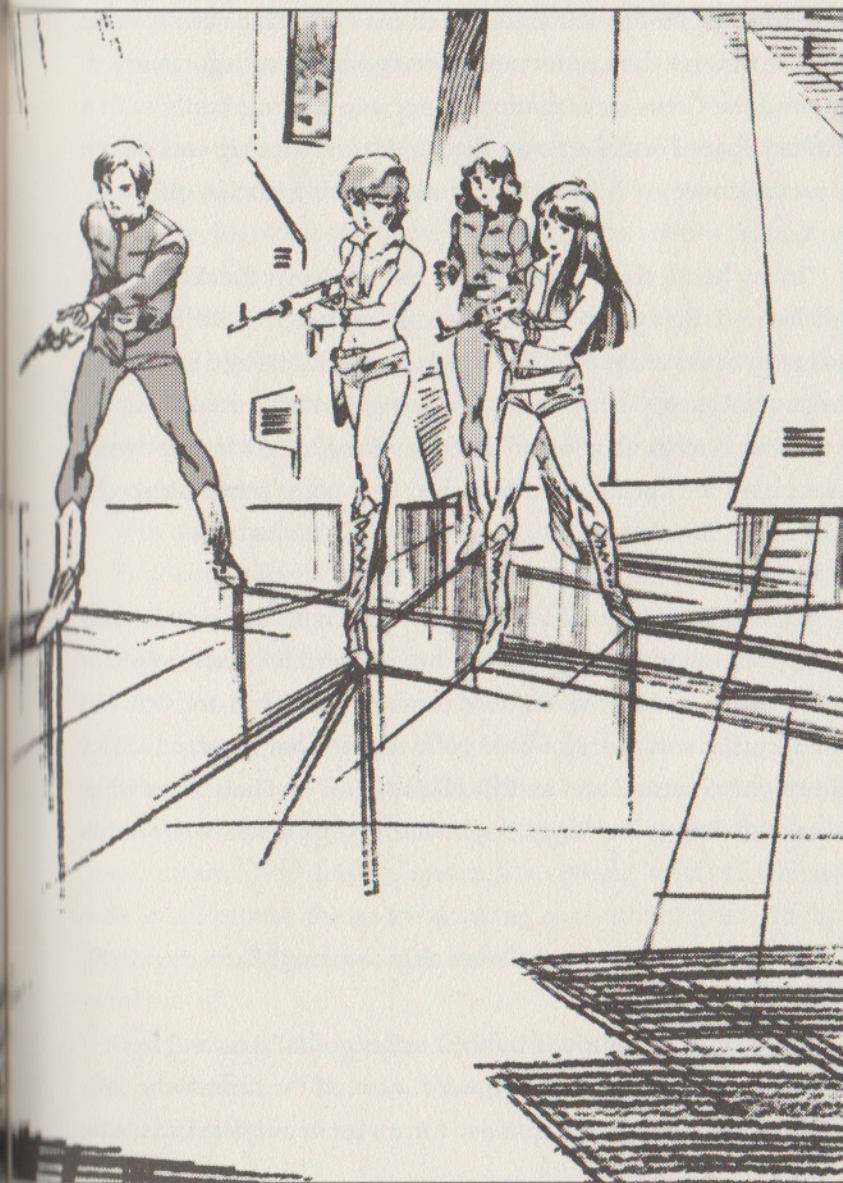
"..."

"And then, from out of nowhere, the day of disaster came. My father, the inventor of this new demon called the Space Smasher, finding himself showered in public criticism, tossed Mother and me aside, and ran away. I learned later that he had jumped around from planet to planet, eventually being shunned everywhere he went. In the end, he found Maleenay, a place he could live a peaceful life."

"All lies . . ." Thunder stated again, his words stumbling out. There was no power behind his voice.

In reality, Thunder had a vague inkling of Isabella's story. Yet, he was a country boy from a backwoods star cluster, and no matter where Dr. Russell went, he was a stranger . . . And crowded places are just like that. What else could you say? Away from your home, everyone is a foreigner.

"Leaving just Mother and me, I took a bad turn. I started hanging out at the entertainment district at night, picking fights with other girls. At that time I got to know a young thug. He was



related to a member of Lucifer. We ended up getting married, and he rose through the Lucifer ranks. Four years after we got married, around the Cetus constellation he got into a heroic battle with a United Space Force destroyer, and in the end his ship was blown up. I took over my husband's turf and became a Lucifer officer."

"..."

"In my home, there were a ton of research notes that Father had left behind. Funny, huh? The Central Computer could purge its memory banks of the data, but it had no way of getting a hold of the originals. I cut myself off from everything, and immersed myself in my father's research notes on the Space Smasher. All on my own, I completed the Lucifer Space Smasher. I got no help from anybody. The Space Smasher belongs to me and to my father only."

"..."

"In order to mass produce the Space Smasher, I decided to build a research laboratory and factory here on Lamier. There's lots of money here, and few restrictions on ships coming in and out. No matter what sort of ship I used, all were allowed to pass. I killed the mighty Standalf, and took over his power. Can you guess what I was thinking in the beginning, building this castle here on this island...?"

"..."

"I thought this would give me a chance to meet Father again."

"..."

"My plan was approved by the Lucifer godfathers, and I put it into effect. But Father never showed. Around the time of the fifth capital destruction, we planned to force a list of our demands to be

broadcast in every home in the galaxy, but before that, I earnestly requested Father to come to me."

"..."

"Father did arrive. I met him here, and killed him. From that moment on, everything inside me was dead. All that was left were my days with blood still pumping through my veins—I was done with dreams."

"You lie!" Thunder yelled, and pointed his laser gun at Isabella and fired. Blaow! Massive amounts of sparks flew for meters. But the beam did not reach Isabella. Laser barrier. There was a protective field between us and Isabella. Thunder and Lucha both collapsed to their knees.

"Ho ho ho ho ho..."

Suddenly Isabella began to laugh. It was a high-pitched shrill, that didn't sound altogether human. She continued laughing harder, raising both hands, and the whip, above her head.

"Isabella, the Space Smasher won't work!" I said. Isabella immediately stopped her chuckling and looked at me.

"I know that..." said Isabella. "You are talking about the Anti-Smasher my father made. From the start, I have installed only the most minimal of defense systems, only one troop of defense soldiers. The way things are working out with the United Space Force attack, I figure we have less than an hour. You will all die with me—!"

"Chck-chck," I clicked my tongue, correcting her. "Don't even try your bullshit with us...! You psycho idiot, certifiable, father-complex, bitch!"

"Ho ho ho ho ho . . ."

Again she laughed maniacally, and then turned her back to us. Facing the shiny black panels, one by one she started pushing levers on.

"I made my Super-Size Super Smasher!" Isabella screamed in a painful screech. The calm and collected Isabella had disappeared. "It doesn't matter if it doesn't work. This is a monument to my and my father's work."

And then it happened.

The entire panel suddenly lit up. Now we could see through a special inlaid glass in the panel, and what we saw shined like an explosion. There was some intense radiation activity. The entire front turned into a bright white light. Isabella seemed to jump, then fall to the floor from shock. We were also hit with a wave of dizziness, and covered our heads with our arms.

The bright light did not lose intensity. On the contrary, the hum of a motor started up from somewhere. I wanted to see the panel's state, but I didn't dare look with my naked eye. However, I was able to surmise that one thing was true. The Space Smasher was functional. There was no other conclusion. Something or other had gone wrong with the Anti-Smasher. We were beyond the point of no return.

"Yuri!" I grabbed Yuri's hand. "We gotta get out of here! Follow me!"

"Thunder! Lucha!" Yuri frantically screamed at the kneeling siblings. But they were completely oblivious to Yuri's cries. A wave of energy blew across the room. Yuri and I were momentarily lifted into the air, and then dropped to the floor. The floor vibrated, and

began to crack. No, it was actually opening up! Not good . . . ! The tremor was becoming more intense, more violent.

Za-zuun! There was the muffled sound of an explosion coming from somewhere. It didn't sound like something the United Space Force used.

"Kei! Over there!"

Yuri was pointing at the Space Smasher panel. The intense light coming off of it had started to fade, and in places fire had begun to spurt up behind the glass. The explosion was inside the Space Smasher.

Isabella stood, obviously still in shock and shaken.

"Get back!" Yuri and I both yelled at the same time.

The sudden huge explosion of the control panel rattled my eardrums. The fire had completely broken through the panel.

"Gyaaa!"

Isabella's body was completely engulfed in a violent flame. No longer a body, but a mass of fire, she fell in our direction.

"Aah!"

We shielded our faces, and cowered. But the fire didn't come as far as we stood. Looking, we saw that the barrier was still in place and functioning. Isabella was reduced to ashes, the shape of a person completely gone.

Krrrack! The walls warned us they were about to break. Straining and twisting, one by one they began to open up. The barrier couldn't stay up forever, either, I figured. Yuri and I rushed to a large opening in one wall. Thunder and Lucha were still frozen in a kneeling position. There was nothing more we could do.

"I'm staying!"

Suddenly Yuri let go of my hand and tried to run to where the other two were. It was suicide! I grabbed Yuri's other wrist and pulled it tight. She ricocheted back to me. The momentum sent us through the hole in the wall.

The barrier expired.

The flames filled the room. From the crack in the wall we had escaped through, fire shot out like a flamethrower, whipping around like a snake's tongue, as long as a roman sash.

"Thunder! Lucha!" Yuri screamed, half-crazed. Don't cry, Yuri! There are other men out there!

The earthquake didn't stop. Scolding the bawling Yuri, we slowly plowed through the mountains of rubble. The inside of the castle was in ruins. I couldn't recognize which way was which. For the moment, we needed to get out of this rampart and find the outside so that I could reset my bearings. The stone walls were crumbling, the pillars were folding, the floor was splitting open. We were as nimble as acrobats. To the left, right, up, then down, we took what looked like the safest route, trudging through the rubble and steel girders. At one point we were almost crushed by a huge several-ton block, which missed us by only centimeters. Sure, I had broken a cold sweat, but chaos was our business, and I was never actually that afraid. Focusing on my acrobatic challenge kept my brain too busy.

How far had we gone? Suddenly, I mean literally, suddenly, we were on the outside of the castle. It was a rather dramatic single step. Straddling a crag, we readily met with the open air.

"Kei..."

Looking up at the sky, Yuri meekly called out my name.

"Hm?" I answered in what I have been told sounds like an emotionless response. Turning my head, my blood instantly ran cold.

"E-eruption..." I stuttered, dumbfounded.

The giant volcanic crater in the center of our island was exploding. Vomiting red fire, we could only see rubble through the rising pillars of blackened ash-colored smoke rising above—

I don't know if it was a buzzing in my ears or the rumble from the ground, but there was a thumping sound twisting through my head. I couldn't stand it any longer. This must be Hell. Red rocks and lava began to rain down here and there. Ash floating in the air started sticking to our bodies. The earthquake was about a magnitude four, and wasn't losing any intensity. My body had almost grown accustomed to the rhythm of the constant shaking.

"*Lovely Angel!*" I called out, half-sobbing. "Where's *Lovely Angel?*"

"There!" Yuri said, apparently figuring out our location from the surroundings. She got it together quicker than I did. At some point she had stood up and surveyed where we were. Most people facing an unheard of crisis of this magnitude don't find the time to calm down and think rationally.

Like a couple of tight-ends avoiding tackles, we ran in a zig-zag. We were trying to dodge bullets. Now I could safely say I was scared.

"Aah!"

Yuri screamed out. Wha-what, did you get hit?

"It's Mugi!" said Yuri. "Mugi is here!"

"Really?!"

I looked where Yuri pointed. He was about one hundred meters to our left. Thanks to the volcanic ash it was hard to see that far.

"Hu-myaa!" I could hear him call out. There was no mistaking. It was Mugi. But what was that dumb lug doing?

Yuri and I ran to Mugi's side. I don't know what he was up to, but he was sitting comfortably on some sort of scrap metal. He was audaciously grooming his coat. You big jerk! You had us worried...

"Hya!" Yuri shrieked again. You really need a volume knob. No matter where you look, you scream!

"Kei..." Yuri called to me. Annoyed, I walked over to where she was standing. It was by some more scrap metal.

"Kei, this is..." Yuri said, her face losing color. "... Thunder and Lucha's submarine jet..."

"Erk!"

Either way, fate would have taken them today. Indeed, it was the submarine jet that they came here on, the one with the Anti-Smasher installed on it.

"What happened? Why is it in pieces...?" I asked Yuri, upset. Her chin jutted out.

"If you look closely you can see for yourself. Every piece has either marks from Mugi's claws or Mugi's teeth."

"Wha-what?" I stammered in surprise. Could she really think Mugi could do something like this? The-the Anti-Smasher, too?

"We were careless..." said Yuri. Somehow at times like this Yuri was able to come across as calm and cool. "The Anti-Smasher uses an electromagnetic wave. That frequency must be one that drives Mugi crazy—"



"Oh!"

I clapped my hands together. So that was why Mugi had gone batty, and jumped out of *Lovely Angel*. I get it . . . It was like it was broadcasting a kind of poison!

"No mistake, to stop the pain he tore it apart," Yuri stated. That must be what happened. But, really, how could that have happened? I guess that's just the way things were meant to be.

"Mugi," I shouted. He ignored me. "You stupid idiot cat! This is all your fault!"

"Take it easy, Kei!" Yuri stopped me. "For now, let's worry about getting onboard *Lovely Angel*."

"Hmph. Fine." I spun around and glared at the slowly shrinking Mugi.

"Mugi, let us on your back and take us to *Lovely Angel*! You at least owe us that much!"

"Mi-gya . . ."

Mugi bowed his head and let Yuri and I mount his back. Before we were fully settled, he took off running.

After a few minutes the shining scarlet hull of *Lovely Angel* came into view. Soon we were able to see her completely. Leave it to Mugi to get us back to her in no time.

"We're in luck." Yuri bowed her head, as if giving thanks. "*Lovely Angel* isn't damaged."

Well of course she isn't! *Lovely Angel* is the strongest ship in the galaxy!

Covered in white ashes, we ran up *Lovely Angel's* boarding ramp.

chapter 10

a tear-soaked epilogue

As fast as we could, we got *Lovely Angel* off the ground and went straight up six thousand meters, and then had to wrestle her into a stable flight path. We were surrounded by United Space Force jumbo-class warships slowly floating in position over the island. Thinking that the continuing destruction of Saint Dominas Isle was probably our fault, the spaceships around us weren't sure what to make of us. Actually, that was kinda cute. Aww . . .

"Hmm, something's not right . . ." Yuri muttered as she stared at a screen. My ears perked up. When she talked like this, it usually meant bad news.

I dashed over to see the main screen. The first thing I saw were incredible eruptions of smoke being choked out of the island flowing ten kilometers into the air. I then saw the volcanic crater in the center of the island. The dense jungle around it was ablaze, and finally I looked beyond to see the ocean, boiling a strange brownish color. Above the frothing brown waves, the earthquake had

triggered tsunamis. I couldn't imagine a more bizarre symphony of destruction, but, at the same time, it was all equally unsettling.

"Seriously, this is really strange!" Yuri was still blabbering to herself. What, had she lost all self-control?

"Yuri!" I called to her. "You keep on chattering like a schoolgirl, but what is it that is so strange?"

"Kei, can't you see it?" she said shocked, looking at me straight in the eyes. "Even though it's that weird . . ."

Oh, really? Is that right? Weird, you say? Hmm. Is that so?

"Where are you talking about, dammit?!" I suddenly shouted out.

"Take a good look! In the ocean!" Yuri screamed back even louder, not about to concede. Ow! That hurt my ears . . . "The volcano is getting wider . . . it's spreading out! The ocean is turning brown, right? What this means is that Saint Dominas Isle is growing, getting bigger, outward from its center. Does that make sense? Sea-level volcanoes come in series, one born after another."

"I get it! Yeah . . ." I gave a cool nod.

"Aa—I have had enough!" Yuri flipped back her long black hair. I am a redhead, with kinky curly locks. Her gesture was no accident. "Normally, things wouldn't pan out like this. Doesn't it seem like there isn't much activity coming from the volcano itself?"

"Aha . . .!"

It finally started to make sense. Oh, how could I be so dense?! Was my brain even plugged in?! That's it! That is it! This is what is so strange!

"It's Isabella's deal . . ." I said. "When she was talking about the Super-Size Space Smasher, she flipped on switch after switch, right?"

"Oop!"

Like she was hit with a shock, Yuri sat up with a start.

"In the scope of this volcano, what is bizarre is the crust of the planet isn't stopping its movement," I continued, dreadfully. "Which means this isn't going to end, which means all of Lamier is going to turn into a volcanic wasteland . . . right?"

" . . ."

"That bitch knew exactly what she was doing, huh?"

"Hm ha ha . . ."

I started laughing, too.

"M ha ha, hu ha ha, ha ha ha, a ha ha, he hee hee, ho ho ho . . ."

We both exploded into laughter.

"Hee ha ha, kya ha ha, oo ha ha, ha heh heh, bu hu hu . . ."

"Aah . . .!"

It was hard to stop once we started.

"Uu ha ha, hu ha ha . . ."

At some point Yuri's laugh started to sound strange to me.

"A ha ha. A ha ha. A ha ha. A ha. A ha. A ha . . ."

It was a noninfectious dry monotone laugh.

Our eyes met.

Our laughing stopped.

"Arabel!" I screamed.

"First the Space Force!" Yuri screamed.

With great excitement, we contacted both Arabel and the Space Force.

This planet—Lamier, is finished. There was nothing we could do to stop what had been started. Not a damn thing. The Space Smasher triggered an unstoppable seismic reaction on Lamier, and

we felt deep sympathy for the entire planet. It's needless to say anything more than that. The collapse of a planet's crust, rivers of magma streaming from its core. There was one thing . . . we could get the residents of Lamier off this planet and to someplace safe. According to *Lovely Angel's* computer data, the planet needed to be evacuated within one thousand hours or we would start seeing some major death and destruction.

That is a big deal.

With the simultaneous cooperation of the United Earth Commonwealth Force and the United Space Force along with neighboring planet-state space forces, a giant evacuation was able to begin. It was an epic exodus sure to show up in history books.

There was no need to berate Mugi on the events of that day again. It was how Mugi were, with the exception of his fasting for three days . . .

Grr! Damn! He drives me nuts.

Seven months later, Lamier continued to be one gigantic volcanic eruption. Magma of temperatures of several thousand degrees cycled to the surface and back to the core, never cooling off, a literal sea of flame. This was no longer a volcano, or anything that simple. The planet had turned into a ball of fire. A one-hundred-thousand-kilometer-wide ball of fire. "The Gem of the Universe," it was stated, "The Most Valuable Thing in the Galaxy," she was called, this beautiful planet in her prime was now gone, leaving a molten mass in her place.

Thankfully, with our fast action, the escape plan was put into place quickly, and in the end, only 3,621 people died on Lamier.

However, because of this sudden disaster, 720,000,000 people don't have a home to return to. They have become wandering nomads with hands outstretched.

Each individual planet in the remote Maleeney star cluster opened its doors to up to twenty percent of the displaced refugees. . .

end

about the author

HARUKA TAKACHIHO was born in 1951 in Nagoya, Japan. In 1972, while still in college, Takachiho founded the animation company Studio Nue, which worked on several animated series throughout the 1970s and 1980s, including the international sensation *Macross*. In 1977 he published his first novel, *Wakusei Pizan no Kiki* (*Crisis on Planet Pizan*), which introduced his popular long-running character Crusher Joe. In 1980 he created the characters Kei and Yuri in the short story "Dirty Pair no Dai Boken" ("The Great Adventure of the Dirty Pair"), for which he won the Seiun Award for best Japanese short story, an award he would win again in 1986 for the follow-up full-length novel *Dirty Pair no Dai Gyakuten* (*The Dirty Pair Strike Again*).

about the artist

In addition to illustrating the covers and interiors of the Dirty Pair novels, **YOSHIKAZU YASUHIKO** is a well-known manga artist, animator, and character designer. Born in 1947, his most famous works include character design work on the animated films and series *The Venus Wars*; *Mobile Suit Gundam*; *Combattler V*; *Crusher Joe: The Movie*; and *Reideen the Brave*.

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In "The Great Adventure of the Dirty Pair" Kei and Yuri are summoned to the planet Dangle when the Gravas Heavy Industries facility is destroyed under mysterious circumstances. But what seems like a simple explosion is masking a far more insidious agenda. Then, in "The Case of the Backwoods Murder," a simple murder investigation on the secluded pleasure planet Lamier is complicated when Yuri runs into two childhood friends, one of them a handsome adventurer named Thunder who captures Kei's heart. But what is the secret connection between Thunder and the murder victim?



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