I had been asleep on the plastic plank. It wasn't only me. Both Yuri and the mayor were there, too. And, Mugi, of course. There was no doubt Mugi'd gathered us together and carried us onto the plank. We gotta get away from this disaster. That's probably what Mugi was thinking when he rescued us.

The plank was floating somewhere in the middle of the lake. I don't know that it was actually the middle, but looking around, I couldn't see the shore in any direction. So it might as well have been smack in the middle. Even if we'd had a way to paddle, I wouldn't have had the foggiest idea which way to go.

"Un, uun."

I heard a groan. It was Yuri.

As I was thinking, Mugi had proceeded to lick Yuri's face. That brought Yuri back to consciousness.

"Wake up, sleepyhead! Chop chop!"

I helped Mugi wake her up. I slapped her lightly on the cheeks. "That hurts!"

Yuri opened her eyes and awoke angry.

"We're drifting in the water."

I calmly told her what was going on, allowing her to take it in as she woke up fully.

"What?!"

Shocked, she jumped up.

There was water all around us. As far as the eye could see. There was no sign of land anywhere.

"Where's the ship?" she asked, looking at me distressed. Yuri was a little slow at grasping the situation.

"I am not sure if it sank or if it broke into pieces, but I am sure we are on top of the last of the remains."

I pointed down. Her eyes followed my finger.

"Isn't this a piece of the ship?"

“Like I told you, we’re floating adrift on the water.”

“Do we have a motor”

“What do you think?!”

“Aah! What’s going on?!”

Again, a shout of surprise rose through the air. This time it was the mayor’s voice. Mugi hadn’t licked his face, so it seemed he’d woken up on his own. That’s a fine man. We explained to the mayor how it seemed some invisible jaws had torn open the ship and how Mugi must have rescued us and that now we were stuck on a plastic plank floating in the middle of the lake.

“Are you sure about the invisible fangs?” the mayor asked, leaning forward.

“If you asked me for proof, I couldn’t help you, but that’s how it looked to me,” I replied. “And look here.”

I pointed to the edge of the plastic plank.

“Wouldn’t you say that looks like some kind of bite mark?”

“What could this…” said the mayor, stretching his neck.

“Yuri, this reminds me of the wound in the old man’s neck. Just at a bigger scale—

“Here!” Yuri snapped her fingers. “It’s about ten times the scale, but there’s no mistaking. This is exactly the same mark as the invisible fangs.”

“Are you saying this one was full-grown?”

The mayor was still stretching his neck out.

“The bite marks on Landis also looked like the bite marks on the old man. The scale was about twice as big in that case, but they looked exactly the same. You could easily tell. I’d never seen anything like it in the entire galaxy.”

“If the mayor is targeting the owner, maybe then the owner has a hand in these attacks,” said Yuri.

“That would be unthinkable,” said the mayor, shaking his head. “If that were true, I would have heard about it through my intelligence network. In regards to the owner, I can safely say that my information network is flawless.”

“Then who is behind these fangs…”

“Mgyaa” Mugi called out. Wondering what he was doing, I turned only to see him looking up into the sky, his feelers wriggling. No, it wasn’t only his feelers. The fine hair where his ears should be were vibrating. This Mugi was up to something.

Then it became obvious.

“Look!” screamed Yuri, pointing at the sky.

The sun was behind us. Mugi was also staring the same way.

“Something’s flying this way. It looks like an airship!”

“Really?!”

The mayor tried to stand up. The plank started rocking from his movements. Numbskull! Take a look around! Be more careful!

“It’s a chopper! A helicopter!” Yuri verified looking through her binoculars. At that point I could still only see a black dot. If it was a helicopter, Mugi could have broadcast our location to it. That’s what he’d been doing when he was vibrating the fine hairs.

“Aa!” Yuri yelped in surprise. She shook the binoculars excitedly. What is it that you saw? Is there something else flying towards us?

“It’s Jeff! Jeff is the pilot!” Yuri shouted. Coming this way, you said?! Jeff, you said?!

I snatched the binoculars from Yuri’s hand. I searched for the helicopter, desperately trying to line up the sights.

Yes, yes, it appeared that Jeff was riding in the helicopter.

“I wonder why Jeff is the one to—” Yuri mumbled.

Please! Of course it’s Jeff coming out here.

We left him behind, remember?

“Take us to my mountain retreat. You know where it is, right? Hurry. There is something I’d like to show you.”

After getting pulled into the helicopter by a rope and sitting down, but before we could even get our seatbelts fastened, the mayor made this hasty request.

“There’s something you’d like to show us?” I asked. “I certainly cannot wait,” I said sarcastically.

Mugi climbed aboard. This was everyone. After shutting the door, Jeff skillfully handled the control stick.

He slowly brought the chopper around. I was disappointed to hear that Jeff hadn’t flown here to rescue me. It was part of his duties as sheriff.

After getting pounded by The Golem and taken to the hospital, Jeff received medical treatment and regained consciousness. He had rested for about three hours, and then went back to his office. This was about the time we were boarding *El Santo*. Then he spent some time cleaning up the office, and during that time he received an emergency bulletin. The call came in from the yacht harbormaster. He said he received a mayday call from a cruiser that was out on an excursion on Lake O’Tana. The mayday was from the ship’s distress beacon. The ship’s computer sends the signal automatically at the first sign of an emergency. At any rate, the first impact we felt was from the exploding submarine, no doubt about it.

Jeff continued flying forward. It was the sheriff’s helicopter, but he kept it on the roof of a nearby building, not his own office.

After getting over Lake O’Tana he’d picked something up on the radar. If the readings were accurate, he had located some object floating approximately one meter above the surface of the lake. He flew there as fast as he could. And that’s where he’d found us drifting in the water.

Hearing this, it was only luck that had brought Jeff to us. What kind of story is that? Of course, I wanted to hear that it was destiny that brought Jeff back to me. Whenever there is an incident or accident, the sheriff always has to go and see.

The mayor’s mountain retreat was outside Aslaville, partway up a small

mountain. From Lake O'Tana it took about ten minutes by helicopter.

I was a little worried we might be attacked while flying, but there were no problems, and we landed safely at the mountain retreat. Jeff let us all out in the retreat's garden.

"All right, then. I'll see you back at the police station…"

With a wave he was about to lift back off into the air.

"You aren't stopping in?" asked the surprised mayor. Did he forget how he'd spoken down to the sheriff in the chopper? It didn't matter how close they were, it was more normal in these kinds of situations to put rank and file aside and try and communicate like human beings.

"Yes, come on. Don't be shy."

I had ulterior motives for wanting to restrain Jeff. But, he politely, but clearly, declined the invitation.

"I can't be gone from my office for very long. It's a burden on the citizens."

It was a line that almost brought a tear to my eye. I know it sounds like I am kidding when I say that, as I am not one to say that sort of thing. But really, that line was so Jeff, and it was dreamy. I couldn't protest, and instantly agreed with what he said.

The chopper rose into the air and disappeared into the blue sky.

"He's a strange one, that sheriff," the mayor said, shrugging his shoulders. The mayor couldn't understand the ways of a true and diligent young man.

We entered the retreat home. We met the stares of a group of sharp men frozen in place. These men must be the security staff I had heard about. They were in plain clothes, but they didn't carry themselves like average citizens.

We passed through the living room. It was a spacious room. It looked like it was mainly used for parties. There were several low tables scattered around the room, and cushions were spread around on the carpet. On the right-hand side was bar and counter. One hundred people could easily assemble here.

"Feel free to make yourselves comfortable," said the mayor. Just to be sure, we avoided going near the windows. We chose a table near the middle of the

room and sat down. Arranging my legs, I leaned over to lie down on a cushion. Aah… this feels nice. With my neck and back still hurting from the ship, I could lie here forever. Mugi scooted in by Yuri and stretched his long body as he lay down.

“Here you go,” the mayor said, looking at us while he fumbled for something behind the bar.

A circular opening appeared in the center of the table. Filled cocktail glasses rose quietly from the opening. I wasn’t expecting alcohol to rise through the hole. But then I realized this would be convenient for when there were a lot of guests.

“Cheers to our safe arrival!” said the mayor, walking over and clinking our glasses.

“With special thanks to Mugi!”

I raised my glass to the one who deserved the most praise. He responded with a long yawn.

“And now…,” said Yuri, after draining her glass in one gulp, “what is it you wanted to show us?”

“This.”

The mayor entered a series of numbers into a panel on the side of the table.

Again, the center of the table opened up. But this time what rose up wasn’t a cocktail glass. It looked like a piece of rock. Long, thin, and cylindrical. It was about two centimeters thick. It was at least ten centimeters long.

“What is this?” I asked.

“About one month ago this was discovered in a mine.”

“It looks like some kind of statue,” said Yuri.

“I call it ‘Angel of Chakra.’ It is a product of a non-human civilization.”

“Non-human? Impossible!”

My face stiffened. I wanted to say that non-human civilizations were no laughing matter. They are certainly incredibly rare. And actual evidence of their

existence is, well, almost non-existent.

“What do you think this figure is made of?” the mayor asked us, turning the tables.

“Stone… is what it looks like to me,” answered Yuri.

“Metal,” said the mayor, shaking his head. “Harder than KZ alloy. And this was manufactured by machine.”

“Wha—!”

We simultaneously swallowed our breaths. We had heard of metals harder than KZ alloy, but never heard of one that strong made mechanically. Our Bloody Card is made of a material stronger than KZ alloy, Tegnoid steel, but it can only be molded using a thermal manufacturing process. On top of that it can only be done at very specialized facilities.

“Now do you understand why I say this is the product of a non-human civilization?”

“Yeah, but the real question is, where did it come from? Someone must have dug that up and given it to you,” said Yuri.

“Not much gets past you,” the mayor said, clapping his hands,

“The person who dug it up was a miner named Galbaldy.”

“Galbaldy?!”

I looked at the mayor.

“That was the man killed in Jeff’s office by the invisible fangs…”

“Yes. The same Galbaldy.”

“Does the owner know about this figure?” Yuri asked.

“Naturally. On top of that, he’s hiding an incredible collection of his own. He’s probably hoping to help Lucifer with this discovery.”

“That’s not good news. Seriously—”

I examined the figure sitting on the table. Nothing about it reminded me of an angel, but it did seem to be modeled after some unknown creature. Was it

possible that the model of this figure and the creature with the invisible fangs could be connected? Or were they completely unrelated? Hmm. Why did it have to be so complicated? All these ideas were getting jumbled in my head.

I was getting flustered. I am not good with complex problems. I prefer simple.

But then it struck me. I remembered something. That's right. It was when the *El Santo* was attacked by the fangs. That time we saw it. If we could understand it clearly, then the conversation would become less complex.

I was about to ask the mayor about it.

But I was interrupted.

A shrill emergency alarm pierced the air.

It sounded with no warning. Unprepared for the loud sound, I jumped a full meter straight into the air.

"Now what?!"

The mayor fiddled with some buttons. A part of the wall across from us changed into a screen. On the screen was the one member of the crack security team we'd seen at the entry.

"It's the master," said the man on the screen. "He brought another thirty people, and now they are making a scene in front of the gate."

"Who is 'the master'?" I asked the mayor.

"Why don't I show you?" said the mayor, changing the view on the screen. On the display was a view of the retreat, in front of the main gate. The retreat was surrounded by a tall wall and a large metal gate. In front of the gate a bizarre-looking crowd of people was assembled. They were all wrapped in white robes.

"In the center of that crowd is a man in a mask."

The mayor zoomed in on the center of the crowd. Indeed, there was a man in a smooth, silver, faceless mask filling the screen.

"This guy, this is the master. He's also known as the leader." Leader! I know that name. Landis mentioned him.

The group yelled a big chant together. The sound came through from a

microphone attached somewhere near the gate.

They were yelling, “Pagans! Begone from this sacred land!”

Master.

First the owner, then the mayor, and now another strange character makes his entrance into this case. Damn. Things just got even more complicated.

6

Total darkness.

It’s so dark, I can’t see anything. Yuri should be right beside me, but I can’t actually see her. Heck, I could stick my hand straight out in front of me, but still wouldn’t be sure if it was there or not. Just to make sure, I felt my own face with my hand. It was there, all right. Ooh. Even in this situation, I could keenly feel how cute I was with my fingers. It was a moving new discovery. Okay, so I was being a little narcissistic. Just for a few moments.

“What are you doing?” Yuri asked sourly. “Everything is attached, right?”

I was surprised. How could she see what I was doing? She is usually so dense. It was only at times like this she’d show some kind of special insight. It’s really not a desirable quality.

In my head I was answering with all sorts of pointed and vulgar responses, while at the same time I prepared my heatgun. However, what I was really worried about was since we were in the dark, I couldn’t see my target. I propped my elbow. I guessed about where the target should be. Mugi, asleep in a comfortable bed inside, would have been able to point out the target to me. Comfortable bed.

Aah. Just the fantasy reminded me how tired I was. I was about to yawn. That could mean inevitable death. Thinking about it, we hadn’t slept for about thirty hours straight, standard time. I had taken medicine to help, but every body has its limits. How good it would feel to just lie between some warm sheets and close my eyes…

Those thoughts only brought me closer to slumber.

No. This is not good. C'mon, dummy! Don't sleep!

I scolded myself.

But, it didn't work.

"Snu-nu-nu-nu-nu"

I could hear Mugi's snore rattling inside my head.

My eyes flew open.

At some point I had fallen fast asleep.

I had laid down on a sleeping pad, and my heatgun had fallen from my grasp.

I picked it up and held it again.

"Grrrrr,"

Mugi growled ferociously. He was lying over there somewhere in the darkness, and even though I couldn't see him, I could imagine exactly what he looked like at that moment.

I could see Mugi with his back curled up. When he growls like this, it means the enemy is about to arrive. There was no doubt he wasn't going to walk through the door and shout, "I'm home!" He was close, but whether he would attack from the ceiling or the floor or a wall, wasn't clear. Or if he would even attack or not attack, regardless, we were in the same situation. The only being I know that can distinguish the difference is Mugi.

"Grrrrr," Mugi's growl deepened. Yuri and I held our breath and waited a moment.

I started getting dizzy. Ca-can't make it. And then, another wave of drowsiness—

"GRROAR!" Mugi bellowed once.

At the same time I heard the shrill sound of sheets being torn. The claws of all four paws kicked off the mat. The sound of fangs. Not Mugi's. The attacker's!

The bed was obliterated. Up until now, the same bed that Mugi had been

poised on. I still couldn't see, but I could tell by the sound. It almost sounded like an explosion. My eardrums rang from the noise. The ringing in my ears made me dizzy. Pieces of the mattress landed on me. That poor bed! Destroyed in one chomp.

A pain shot through my finger. It was the ring finger of my left hand. It was giving off a phosphorescent glow.

A signal from Mugi.

I squeezed the trigger of my readied heatgun.

An orange heat beam swirled through the darkness.

I continued to shoot to the side.

Another beam rang out. This time it was from Yuri's heatgun. In certain situations, a ray gun by itself isn't enough, so she'd borrowed a heatgun from the mayor.

Our two beams crossed each other, became intertwined, and scorched the wall and floor.

The room lit up. Rather, the darkness was watered down a little. The features of the room floated faintly in a red light, due to the heat beams and flames. The splintered bed. The scorched wall. The invisible fangs and Mugi scuffling.

Mugi turned. His movements were fast. He was looking straight at us.

Which meant…

The fangs were coming our way!

This was no joke!

I started firing like crazy. I set the space in front of me ablaze. Ya-KUN!

I felt something slam into me.

It was the fangs biting. They were biting into the bed we were using as a shield.

Half of the bed was now ribbons. The next hit was on the other half, and that was a direct hit on where we were.

Still holding on to our shield, we were thrown to the wall. We landed where the floor met the wall.

As we turned around the remains of the bed landed on top of us. Blam.

The two of us were squashed together under the bed.

Thankfully the bed landed mattress down on top of us, rather than the other way around. It was heavy, but we weren't hurt badly.

Getting up would be dangerous, so we remained on the ground and shot our heatguns from under the fallen bed. There was no one else in the room, so our random blasting didn't matter, but if there were they probably would have been burnt to a crisp. It's a little embarrassing, but from that position we looked like a two-headed snapping tortoise.

We were low to the ground, and Mugi bounded between the walls above us and landed.

There was a flash.

That's bright!

Several of the illumination panels in the ceiling suddenly came to life.

Going from almost darkness to super-bright in an instant made my eyes and head pound. Ouch!

Mugi was the one to turn the switch on.

The fangs were gone. Maybe it had escaped through the wall we were shooting at. Since it slipped away, we no longer needed to hide ourselves.

Hoo boy, this room was a disaster area.

The walls were almost completely blackened. The ceiling was well scorched and in the worst spots was melted with gaping holes burned through. Construction was done with fireproof materials, so the fire never spread, but the actual spot where our heatgun blasts and the flames hit took quite a beating. The floor was covered with broken pieces of bed, and it looked like a tornado had blown through the room. The carpet was torn to shreds. There was no trace of any tables or chairs.

“Mgyaa…”

Mugi came over to where Yuri and I were and licked each of our faces. Knucklehead! If you have time for that, why don’t you get this damn bed off of us?! I am not going to be happy if I come out of here with a flat chest!

“I was so sure we had him,” said Yuri.

“Not much we can do about it now.”

Even from my squished position I shrugged my shoulders.

“Mgya,”

Mugi nodded his head in agreement. Like he had all the time in the world, Mugi walked over and took the edge of the bed in his mouth. He was going to pull the bed off of us, but acted like it was a real chore. Is it possible he could he move any slower? Where was that Mugi that was bouncing off the walls in the heat of battle? Sorry this isn’t as exciting.

Right then.

Out of the blue, there was a knock on the door.

Someone had arrived.

Surprised, we jumped to our feet. This movement sent the bed springing into the air. One of the bed legs caught Mugi’s chin.

“Buugya!” Mugi moaned.

The door opened.

A hotel manager entered the room. Behind him stood about five porters. They must have come to see what all the noise was.

The manager looked around the room, his mouth was open, but no words came out.

His eyes were struck wide open, and his body was shaking.

“Wha-what, what… he-he-here…”

He stuttered for about two minutes.

“Well, it pretty much speaks for itself,” I finally said, holding my hands palms

facing up. “Put the damages all on the mayor’s tab, ‘kay? Whatever you do, don’t send the bill to the WWWA. Got it?”

If the chief got a bill for these damages, he would no doubt strangle us.

“The wa-wall… fl-floor…”

The manager was looking anemic.

“You’ve been a terrific help,” I said sarcastically and pushed the manager out of the room and closed the door. You were really lucky. Only one room was damaged. The rest of the hotel is still perfectly safe.

7

After the master and his followers left, we left the mayor’s mountain retreat to stay at a hotel in Aslaville.

It was because I had a feeling that the fangs might make another attack. This time I wanted to put the fangs on the defensive. A complete counterattack.

Hearing this idea, the mayor immediately suggested we stay at the hotel.

No matter what happened, he would take full responsibility, boasted the mayor. He would just be paying for it out of taxes, right? I am not sure why he was acting so proud.

But the mayor saying he would “take full responsibility” made me very happy. We borrowed a car from the mayor and headed into town.

The hotel wasn’t in the center of town, but closer to the outskirts. The Hybrid-Royal Hotel. The name rang of elegant perfection. The mayor said it was Aslaville’s top-class hotel, but would probably be considered a high-mid-tier hotel in a normal city. Of course, that didn’t matter now. I would bet anything it was built by the owner. Knowing his personality, he didn’t spend any money more than needed on service and amenities. We were going to lure out the fangs, so, in fact, a real first-class place would have caused a problem.

We arrived at our room. This room, as well, was at a high-mid-class level. I did

like the fact that it was big and spacious.

After some tea and a couple minutes rest, we got ready for Mr. Fang's visit. We'd eaten and showered at the mayor's retreat, so that wasn't on the to-do list. First we needed to the room to be completely pitch black. Since Chakra never got dark, this presented a problem. The door appeared to be airtight, so that wouldn't be an issue, but the windows were going to be a problem. No matter what we did, light still got through. Finally we used a spray putty which was stocked in town and covered all the windows top to bottom. We then let the putty harden. Then we could see how the fanged one did in the dark, and expected that it probably wouldn't be happy with what we had set up.

And with some finishing touches, we had the room perfectly and completely black. We hid in the shadow of the bed, and waited patiently for the fangs' attack. Even in the darkest of darkness, it was easy to see that this room was going to take some damage.

And it got away.

The anticipation and preparation of the second attack was perfection on our part, but what we were missing was the finishing move, the checkmate. Not being able to see it, we had a hard time reacting, but why was it that it tore apart the ship and bed with its teeth? This was a really difficult enemy to put a finger on. But one thing we did learn: the fangs could not take Mugi down. An attack on Mugi resulted in a Mugi fighting back, not the expected easy kill. This might be a key in taking care of this creature.

"Ke-i!" said Yuri. She was sitting down on the half-chomped mattress. She was holding her knees to her chest and her head was tilted to the side.

"So now what do we do? We almost had it. I doubt it'll be showing up for while."

"If we can't get the fangs, then we have to go to that, you know," I answered. "We need to try and figure out what that was."

That was the vision we'd seen when the ship was attacked by the invisible jaws.

Yuri and I saw things as espers. Our power only worked when we were

together, and we saw things as one.

Clairvoyance.

This is our special power. When there is information for us to gather, we fall into a sort of trance. Then in a deep state of ecstasy, a vision floats up from the depths of our consciousness.

From that vision we can see a kernel of information relating to whatever incident is involved.

Unfortunately, our power isn't a perfectly tuned machine. But not being perfect isn't necessarily a bad thing. Maybe clairvoyance isn't the best word. Half-voyance is probably more accurate. We see visions, and see them clearly, but it's usually more of a hint, or a hint of a hint. We are only given subtle fragments. So the real challenge is what to do with the info once we have it. It's like trying to solve a riddle.

What we'd seen when I grabbed Yuri's hand on the yacht was a black egg.

I couldn't tell how big it was. I couldn't tell you if it was an actual egg, or something just in the shape of an egg. It was just a vision of a black egg, but it stood out clearly floating against the white background of our trance.

"I wonder if there is anyone who could help us figure it out," said Yuri as she stared at the ceiling.

"Jeff can help us," I answered a little too quickly. "I wanted to ask him about it earlier, but missed the chance. For questions like this, there is nobody but Jeff to confer with."

"What does he know?" said Yuri, shaking her head. "This doesn't have anything to do with Landis, you know."

"But even then, he helped us search," I rebutted. Any excuse to get back to Jeff was good enough for me. My mind was set. "Even if he doesn't have an answer right off the bat, he'll help us find the solution. If he can give a clue to what it means, what do you have to complain about?"

"I think looking into the owner is going to give us answers faster," Yuri resisted stubbornly. "If he really is a part of Lucifer, if we follow him he won't be

able to keep it hidden for long. Eventually he'll show his true colors, and we'll be right there to see it."

"The owner, huh?" I twisted my head back. "We would have to be incredibly discreet. Don't forget the mayor, who told us his info, I think we should wait and see rather than rush in on this one."

"Hnn," Yuri groaned, her lips tightening.

"Hnn," I growled back, crossing my arms. This is the problem that comes up when trying to manage these little cases.

It was a glaring contest… and Yuri finally folded.

So it was decided, we were going back to Jeff's office. I was about as happy as I had ever been.

With no delay, we were in the car we'd borrowed from the mayor and headed downtown.

But then.

Jeff wasn't at his office.

Since his office was still damaged, all that was there was one ugly-looking repair robot.

"INCIDENT OCCURENCE REPORTED GAUTAMA SECTOR… SHERIFF DEPART TO EMERGENCY… LAST COMMUNICATION 17 MINUTES 20 SECONDS AGO… PLEASE TRUST ME WITH URGENT COMMUNICATION… MESSAGE DELIVERED UPON SHERIFF RETURN…"

The robot's voice sounded like a child with no intonation, and it would deliver communications in the same manner. We really couldn't leave a message about the black egg like this.

We returned to the car in dejection.

"Where could the Gautama sector be," I wondered aloud.

"This car doesn't have an auto-navi," said Yuri as she examined the dashboard from the passenger seat. "We can't go to a place if we don't know where it is!"

"Then let's go to a place we do know."

“Where would that be?”

“The owner’s place.”

“Waa—” Yuri fell forward across the console. “What happened to all that talk about discretion?!” she snarled, popping back into her seat at lightning speed.

“If Plan A fails, move to Plan B. That’s just common sense, right?” I asked unperturbed.

Score one more for Kei.

8

We didn’t go the Salvatore, but rather to the Chakra Development Company headquarters, or CDC for short. This was the owner’s main base of operations, at least according to the mayor. We understood that at night he worked out of Salvatore, but normally Telestofarnus could be found at the CDC headquarters building in the “Owner’s Room.” If we believed what the mayor told us, then we could consider that place to be Lucifer’s Chakra branch office.

The headquarters building was smack in the center of Aslaville.

It wasn’t far from downtown at all. But, that doesn’t mean it was a short trip. It was a hard-to-get-to location. It was surrounded by a beautifully manicured park, with a one kilometer radius and no other structures around. Between the grass and the trees, it is completely blanketed in rich greens, making a truly breathtaking sight. It looked richer and more beautiful than the mayor’s residence or the Chakra government offices.

“It’s gorgeous…”

Yuri let out a sigh at the sight of the gardens.

“It doesn’t fit with that chubby guy.”

Thinking about how it would fit better with Jeff soured my mood. Along the drive to the CDC headquarters building through the park I swore under my breath from the driver’s seat. The front of the headquarters building rose up

ahead, lording over its surroundings. It was an eight-story cylindrical building. Aslaville has not even one high-rise building. And there is a good reason for that. The ground was weak. When Aslaville was reclaimed the ground was treated with a resin, but even still, the planet's crust remained brittle. This condition is excellent for mining minerals, but not very conducive to human living. The fifteen thousand people who had moved here couldn't be expected to live in their simple rental homes for decades and decades on end. They did some developing and came up with codes and restrictions on building structures. A part of those was tight restrictions on building heights.

"Take a right there," said Yuri.

The road split to the right and left. In front of the entrance to the headquarters building the road turned into a giant loop. The loop began where our car was, directly opposite of the entrance.

Getting out of the car, we walked up the wide but short grayish-white stone staircase. Mugi, who had stayed in the car at Jeff's office, got out with us here.

We entered the lobby.

It was a grand vaulted hall. In the center hung a five-meter-tall crystal chandelier and on the walls were intricately crafted tapestries. It looked like some sort of palace. As expected, the scale was slightly smaller, but you get the idea.

To the left was the information booth. The booth itself was made up of elaborate woodcut panels. I peered closer hoping to spy some ripe young hunk, but all I saw were two fake-looking women looking at us, trying to hide their giggling. The two of them looked a little older than the two of us. We are both nineteen years old, so they were probably twenty-one or twenty-two. They both had model-class looks and figures, though not quite meeting my level of excellence. Even on this remote planet they were able to find staff of this caliber. No doubt these girls were paid well. Or could it be they were members of Lucifer, too? Either way, it didn't matter. All I knew for sure was that they weren't giving Yuri, Mugi, and me a very warm welcome. Their faces were twitching from their giggles.

We stood in front of the booth's window.

“The owner in?” I asked calmly, flipping open my WWWA ID.

“One moment please.”

One girl started clicking buttons on her keyboard smoothly.

“I am afraid he is out right now,” she answered after a few moments.

“We’d like to see him soon,” said Yuri from my side. “Can you tell us where we can find him?”

“I will ask and see.”

Her fingers drifted effortlessly over the keyboard again. Her eyes seemed to be focused on a screen which fed her the information we needed, but couldn’t see ourselves.

She looked up at us.

“I am sorry to have to ask, but please inquire with that person over there.”

She pointed to somewhere to the side of the booth. The adjacent wall was a video screen.

The screen flickered to life.

The face of an arrogant-looking middle-aged man filled the screen.

“Okay, so, you WWWA TCs…”

It wasn’t just his face with the sour attitude. His intonation was snide, too.

“You are not privy to the owner’s whereabouts and I am not obliged to tell you. So, why don’t you hurry back through the door you came in?”

Textbook answer. As nice as the place looked, it didn’t take long to see the level of the people behind the façade. Put a pig in a tuxedo…

The screen went black.

“Say, Yuri,” I said, turning to her. “It’s kind of a waste, don’t you think?”

I glanced up at the five-meter-tall chandelier.

“It is a waste, Kei,” she replied, her eyes dancing over the scene.

“But, sometimes it can’t be helped.”

That’s right. Sometimes it can’t be helped. Especially if your enemy is Lucifer.

We each pulled out a small capsule from pockets in our hot pants.

“If I were you, I’d get down and get my head under a desk or something.”

Yuri was kind enough to warn the girls in the information booth. The girls in the booth gave bewildered looks, not catching what Yuri was trying to say.

Yuri and I flicked the capsules from our fingers to the center of the hall.

Explosion.

A huge red torch rose up as an ear-piercing boom rang through the lobby. The explosion created a shockwave which rattled the walls.

The chandelier exploded into a million pieces.

The shards scattered all across the lobby floor.

“Kyaa!”

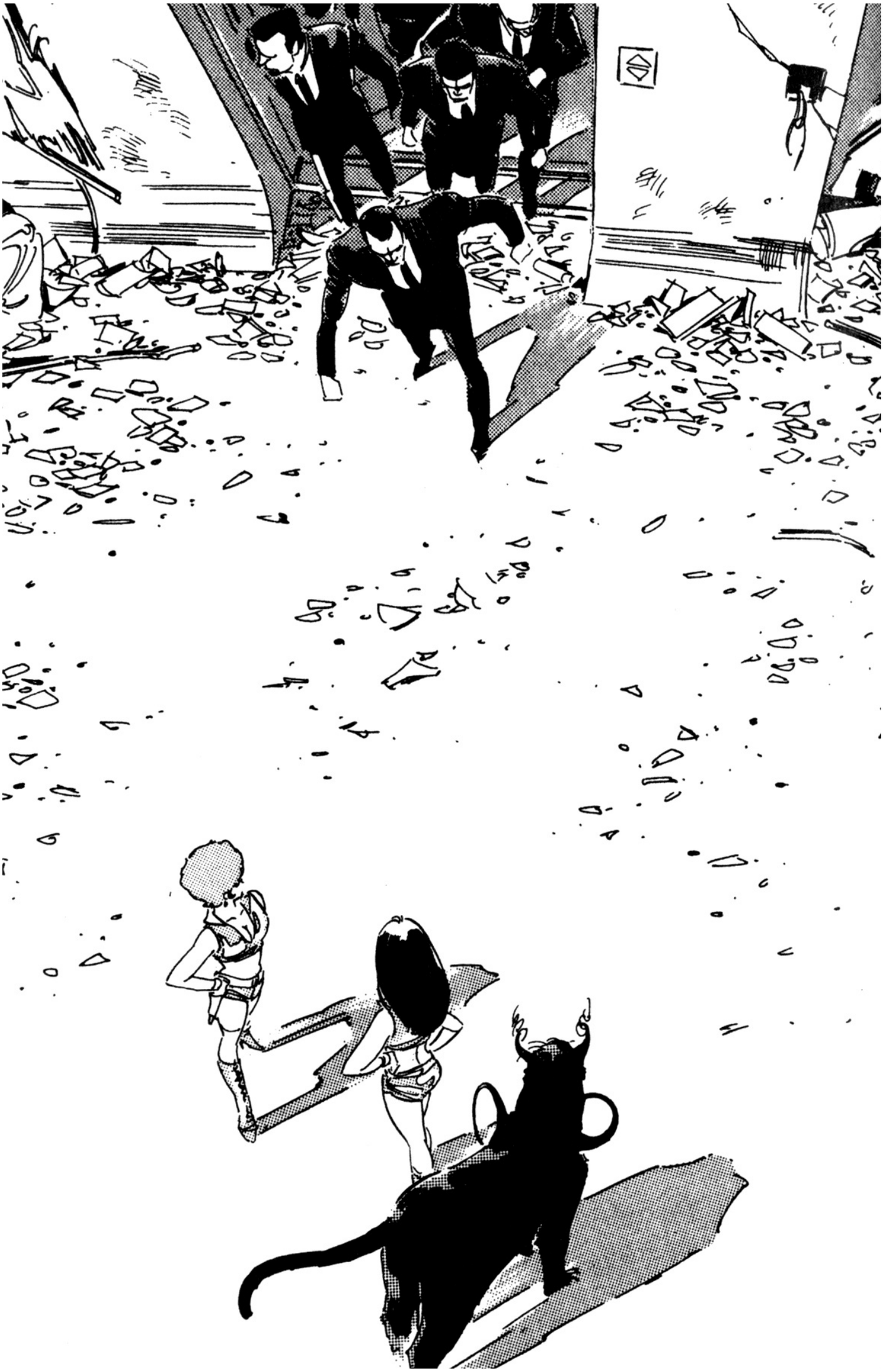
The information-booth girls screamed in unison.

Of course, Yuri and I had pressed ourselves against the closest wall.

A crack ran across the ceiling, and the walls started to crumble. Anything glass broke. The beautiful tapestries fell with the walls that held them.

“What in the hell…!”

From the elevator about ten tough guys in black suits came storming out. The guy on the screen we’d just talked to was one of them.



The men took a quick look at the lobby, and seemed to all gulp simultaneously. A split-second later Yuri and I stepped forward.

“Did you two bitches do this?!” yelled one of the men after noticing us. What a mouth on this guy!

My answer was to pull out my heatgun and squeeze the trigger.

The heat ray scorched the floor.

The potty-mouthed dude was petrified.

“Kei and Yuri from the WWWA were simply asking the location of the owner,” I said.

I fired another shot from the heatgun. Just to make sure the point was clear, Mugi issued a growl.

“Ple-please stop.”

The man from the screen felt compelled to raise his hand. His facial expression told me that he probably needed to change his underwear.

“The owner is dealing with an incident in the Gautama sector right at this moment. I understand he is taking care of that. Right now communications are blocked. We are unable to contact him at this time.”

“Incident?”

“In Gautama sector?”

Yuri and I looked at each other. That’s where Jeff was, too.

“What sort of incident?” I asked the man.

“I understand there was a landslide, but I don’t know any details. I just know he went there right after hearing about it.”

“I see,” I said nodding.

No matter how we played it, where we needed to be was the Gautama sector.

“Last question,” Yuri stated calmly.

“Yes, you name it,” replied the man enthusiastically.

“Where the hell is the Gautama sector?”

That’s the question I was waiting for.

9

After receiving detailed directions to the Gautama sector we returned to the car. It was a slightly drastic measure, but we’d been able to fix the guy’s attitude problem. It’s never too late in life to learn a valuable lesson. We drove around the loop and drove away from the CDC headquarters building. Making it back through the beautiful park, we got on the highway toward the outskirts. Since we didn’t have an auto-navi, we had to watch the highway signs and make sure we didn’t miss our exit, which was a pain. Yuri was looking up, pulling back her black hair.

That’s when it happened.

A voice was broadcast out of the communicator.

The incoming-call signal didn’t even go on. Suddenly there was a voice.

“This is the mayor. Kei, Yuri, can you hear me?”

The static was awful, and he sounded wound up, but this was definitely the mayor’s voice. Surprised, I turned sharply and the car swerved.

“You’re gonna kill us!” Yuri shouted angrily. This was no time to start filing complaints.

“Mayor, this is Kei. What’s wrong?” I answered. There was no image on the video screen.

“Oh, am I getting through?”

The mayor’s voice sounded relieved.

“Mayor, where are you hailing us from? The connection is pretty bad, so just give us the basics,” I told him.

“I am on my way to the Gautama sector,” he replied. “There’s been an

accident at Mine #4. I hear it's pretty bad."

Mine #4! Accident!

So that's what was going on in Gautama. It was a problem at a mine. We'd gotten the directions from the guy at the headquarters building, but we should have asked for this info, too.

"I'm in a plane, so I'll be there momentarily. Please, come as soon as you can. It's possible this has something to do with the case."

"We're already on our way!"

I gave him the short version of our visit to the CDC headquarters building. When he heard how the lobby was left in ruins, it suddenly got quiet on the mayor's end.

"But it will take us some time to get there," I said. "We're in a slow six-wheeler and there is no auto-navi. I guarantee we are going to get lost once we exit the highway."

"No need to worry," said the mayor. "You can use the communicator as an auto-navi. It's set up so you can get directions directly from satellite. Turn to channel 18 and input code 28291. If you do that the screen will give you a bird's-eye view of the area. You can check by voice where you are."

"Cool! Why didn't you tell us about this before?"

"Sorry. I forgot," the mayor apologized.

Yuri quickly switched the communicator to navigation mode.

"All right, I'll see you when you get there. Maybe, that… can make it… I think."

"Maybe?"

"…is …at …won't…"

The static interference worsened.

"Mayor, wait!"

"…"

Nothing got through. Turning the volume up didn't help, it was nothing but

noise.

“It’s no use,” I said, giving up.

“Let’s just hurry up and get there,” said Yuri. She was a hundred percent right. The map was set, all I had to do was hit the gas and the car would take us to the Gautama sector.

I pushed the pedal in as far as it would go.

However—

This was Chakra.

Nothing is ever easy or direct.

We never would have imagined the obstacles that got in our way.

The Gautama sector was an incredible place. The mayor came in by plane, Jeff got there using his special helicopter, and no doubt the owner had some kind of jet to get there. My burning desire to get there was starting to wane.

The road was a road in name only. The three-meter-wide expanse was lined with vertical cliffs on either side.

We bounced our way down the path. The car was set to automatic drive so we didn’t have a chance to try and stop it. We stared ahead blankly without saying a word. From the time we got off the highway, I knew something wasn’t quite right. The road was unusually rough, and it got increasingly narrow.

All of a sudden we were climbing a slope which got more and more steep. The grass and trees disappeared and we bounced around over the bumpy mountain road. Looking down, the cliff was just under us. And it wasn’t just some ten or twenty meter little drop-off. There was nothing for hundreds of meters straight down.

Along this road our car was plugging along at just over 100 kilometers an hour.

In a panic, I went to turn off the auto-drive and reached out to hit the button on the dashboard, but my finger stopped just in front of the switch.

Of course, if I were to put it into manual, would I be able to navigate this

road?

The answer was no.

What I ended up doing was setting the acceleration to about 30 kilometers slower.

We left the rest up to the car.

We crawled our way along the mountain road.

Yuri and I made a point of not looking outside. We put our seats back and passed the time staring at each other. I was actually kind of sleepy, exerting all that energy earlier had wiped me out.

We were only going up one mountain, but it was taking more time than we had to waste.

We reached the summit of the ridge.

The car stopped there. I was scared to look, but we would have to see what the conditions outside the car were. Yuri and I cautiously peeked up, stretching our necks to the window.

The cliff was no longer there.

Or at least we couldn't see it if it was. We weren't on the road, but had stopped in the center of a wide and open space. Looking out the left side of the car, it appeared that the cliff might still be off the edge of the open area, but on the right was a rocky mountain. At the base of that mountain of rock was a hole, a tunnel, leading in.

Just by looking at it, it didn't look like a particularly sturdy tunnel. Over the entrance an engraved plaque with the number "1" on it had been mounted.

This was Mine #1.

So, we really had arrived at the mines.

Basically, we had made it to the Gautama sector. That's why the car stopped where it did.

But, according to the mayor, the incident had happened at Mine #4.

This was not where we wanted to be. We weren't there yet. Next we would

have to descend along the edge of that dreaded cliff.

Just thinking about it gave me goose bumps.

I wanted to set the speed at five kilometers per hour. Unfortunately at that rate it would take us five days to get there.

“What are we gonna do?”

I looked at Yuri.

“Yeah, what are we gonna do?”

Yuri looked beat, too. “I wonder if #4 is that way…”

I turned my head to look where she meant. Beyond Mine #1.

And then at the same time.

Her face shone a bright white light.

“Aa!” I screamed.

But it wasn’t Yuri’s face emitting the light, but a reflection from outside the car window.

There was a flash from the other side of the mountain.

The flash came in the shape of a gigantic circular ring.

It was bright white, and it spun as it swelled and only faded as it reached the blue sky.

Ouch, that’s bright! I was not able to look straight at it.

And then it disappeared.

It all happened over the space of a moment.

The flash was there, then a moment later was gone, and the blue sky returned.

“That, right now…” said Yuri, turning to me. “What was that, that just happened?”

What are you doing asking me?

Do you think I have any idea what the hell just happened?

4

shakes. crumbles. shakes again!

“Gaooo!”

Mugi suddenly growled. He popped up from the rear seat and his ears stood up straight (strictly speaking they weren’t actually ears, but they looked like ears, so it was just easier to call them that).

He stuck his face up to the window on the left-hand side, his eyes darted around wildly.

His eyes then became fixed on one spot.

“Mgyau,” he cried this time. Raising his right front paw, he patted the window up and down.

Look there, he was saying.

“What is it?” I asked, trying to turn and look from the cramped driver’s seat. I twisted and got my head right next to Mugi’s.

“!”

I wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t see it myself.

Right opposite us. Near the horizon, where the aquamarine-colored sky had turned white. There was a small silver cross shining there in the sky.

The cross was gradually growing larger, as it did it began to develop a distinctive form.

An airplane. It looked like something similar to an airplane. The wings were short, and the fuselage was stumpy and wide. It was a small-type airplane.

And it was flying straight for us.

“Yuri, that’s it!” I called to Yuri sitting in the front passenger seat.

“Wha—?”

Yuri turned around.

Pushing me out of the way, she gazed through the window.

“Pegasus V-II…”

That must be what kind of plane it was. Hearing the name, I remembered seeing it in a catalog or magazine somewhere. If I wasn’t mistaken, the Pegasus V-II was an eight-passenger VTOL.

“There is something weird about this Pegasus,” said Yuri. “It’s really flying strange, at an angle.”

I’d noticed that, too. At first I thought it was circling around, but that wasn’t the case. It looked like the fuselage might have taken some damage, and the plane was bouncing up and down and every which way as it flew.

The plane got closer, and began to wind around the mountain summit we were on from our left. Even though it was flying at a slant it wasn’t quite on the verge of crashing. Its altitude simply wasn’t rising.

“Wonder what he’s trying to do,” I said. “You don’t think he’ll try and land here, do you?”

“It’s not impossible,” Yuri said after quickly surveying the open area. “The wing might clip our car if he tries to land here, or he might possibly have enough space on the ravine floor.”

That wasn’t the answer I was hoping to hear.

The Pegasus roared closer. I could see the fuselage clearly. Its registration number. Blue and red lines. The words MANDALA and CHAKRA.

“Ugaoo,” Mugi roared again.

He glared at the Pegasus and bared his fangs.

Zuun, the muscles in his neck tightened. His black fur stood on end, and his feelers started waving about.

The tendril-like hair where his ears should be began to vibrate. This always

happened when he was manipulating electromagnetic waves or electric currents. Mugi's whiskers would flex back and forth at an incredible speed.

"!"

Yuri's body stiffened.

I was surprised, too.

Suddenly the Pegasus went into a steep turn.

It was almost a 180 degree turn. It's not a move often pulled off by thick-bodied VTOLs. Sweeping over the mountain's surface, the Pegasus seemed to prepare to land.

And then the next moment.

The mountain cracked open.

It wasn't a natural phenomenon. And it wasn't an explosion.

From the mountain's side, the giant invisible jaws.

The fangs!

The fangs were trying to get the Pegasus. Detecting this, Mugi took control of the Pegasus and rolled it. The fangs missed their target, and had come down on the rocky mountain, instead.

Mugi is incredible, but so were these invisible fangs!

"Unh!"

Yuri kicked open the car door.

Unholstering the heatgun from her belt, Yuri took aim.

Naturally, I couldn't be left behind. I jumped to the ground and laid down flat and squeezed the trigger of my heatgun.

The two of us lit the mountain up. Mugi still had control of the Pegasus.

Since we couldn't see our enemy, we filled the air with our fiery blasts. Everywhere we thought it might be.

The faded surface of the mountain turned as black as charcoal.

The fangs did not strike back.

Under Mugi's control, the Pegasus landed in the open area. One wing rested on top of our car. But thanks to Mugi's careful maneuvering, the damage was insignificant. The wing landed softly across the car's roof.

We stopped firing our weapons. It seemed like the fangs dispersed after that one big bite. Maybe it left because Mugi was there.

I stood up. Yuri was starting toward the Pegasus, now on the ground. I wasn't aiming at the airplane, but I did keep my finger on the trigger.

The hatch slowly opened.

My back stiffened.

Above the gangway a human shadow rose.

It exited the plane.

Oh! Well, I'll be…

I suddenly relaxed.

What do you know?

Well, if it wasn't the mayor!

"No, thanks. You really helped me out there. Ho ho ho!" said the mayor as he gave the nearby Yuri an exaggerated hug. He then grabbed her hand and shook it way too hard. I hid myself in the shadow of the car. I am not kidding. When I get near emotional guys like that, I seriously break out in hives.

"When the plane did a sudden bank, I didn't know what to think, but I was really surprised. Again with the fangs…"

The mayor spoke loudly, gesturing with both hands.

Five members of his staff exited the plane and formed a line, their eyes showing no pleasure at the situation. One of them must have also been the pilot. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Weren't you already at Mine #4?" I asked the mayor.

"Yes," the mayor said nodding. "We landed about three hours ago. But the

owner quickly blocked access to the accident at Mine #4."

"Blocked access?"

"Nobody can enter. Even the sheriff was restricted from entry."

"Even Jeff…"

I tried to surmise what the mayor was trying to tell us. But I didn't have enough information, and couldn't read what he wanted us to do.

"We disputed his blocking us, but he wouldn't budge. So we decided to try and take a look at the scene from the air."

"And then there was that giant white flash from the mine," Yuri interrupted.

"That's right. But how did you…"

The mayor blinked, his eyebrows raised.

"We could see it," answered Yuri. "It was on the other side of this mountain. The flash rose up, and then faded away."

"What was it?" I asked.

"I'd like to know as much as you would," said the mayor, shaking his head. "We were about 500 meters above the ground when it happened and the shock was incredible. It felt like we slammed into a giant wall. It's a miracle we didn't crash. But we did take some heavy damage. Thanks to this guy's flying we made it out of there."

"An explosion?"

"A kind of one, maybe."

"But there was no sound and no smoke," said Yuri. "Just a big ball of light spreading in the sky."

"From the air we could see down to the mine."

"And what did you see," I said leaning closer in.

"Nothing."

His answer sounded like it reverberated from the lowest depths of Hell.

"—the mine, the buildings, the drilling equipment, the mountain of rocks, all

of it. All of it gone. Nothing remained."

"What about people? Jeff? Did you escape together?"

My voice shook as I asked.

"Jeff was there and the owner was there. Along with several miners."

"Mugi!" I called out to the Mugi.

"Mgya?"

He came to my side.

"Let me get on your back. Let's get to that mountain. And fast. Like now!" I said facing Mugi. By the time I was done speaking I was already on his back.

I put my arms around his thick neck.

Mugi took off running. With incredible power and speed he ran straight up the mountain of stone.

Kicking off rocks, we left a dusty trail of flying dirt, and Mugi and I arrived at the spot in one, maybe two minutes. My legs were wobbly and I couldn't immediately stand.

To prevent myself from collapsing, I sat down on a big round rock. Just below my eyes I saw a horrible scene.

The mayor hadn't lied. It was exactly as he had said. First of all, where there should have been a continuation of a zig-zagging chain of mountains, it appeared that one mountain had been plucked up and taken away.

One entire mountain.

Now there was a gigantic crater.

A diameter of five kilometers. No, more like six. No. More.

The bottom of the crater was as smooth as a mirror. It reflected a bright tan. This didn't look like the planet's surface. If this was a fantasy story I could say it looked as if some giant took a huge ice cream scoop and scooped out a piece of the planet, and then lined the crater with a thin metal foil.

The far side of the crater was hazy. I wondered if it wasn't fog making it hard

to see. I could no longer see the edge of the crater.

It was like the wasteland or mountain range was stretching away farther, but I couldn't really tell with my bare eyes.

"Jeff,"

His name slipped from my tongue.

"Jeff…"

That's all I could say.

The handsome sheriff, Jeff, was gone.

2

At the mountain summit I stood frozen in shock. I couldn't remain seated, and I couldn't scream. My mind went blank, my brain stopped processing. I just stood. I faced the crater, but I wasn't looking at anything. My trance wasn't totally complete, but about as close as you can get.

I was in a haze. Both literally and figuratively. Everything was white. Was it my surroundings… was it my mind… was it… me…

That's the condition I was in, I don't know for how long.

It felt like a very long time, but later I found out it was only for about ten plus seconds.

There was a sudden tear in the blank space.

I felt a shock push against my legs.

A wave ran through the ground, and the G-force felt like it might crush me.

An incredible boom sounded.

The next moment I was floating in the air.

I landed on my tailbone.

"!"

I couldn’t speak. An intense pain ran from my hips to the top of my head.

This was a truly agonizing scene.

I writhed, gasping for breath.

There—

A second shock came.

I was tossed up again. This time toward a neighboring mountainous slope.

Head first.

It would be instant death.

I frantically grabbed my knees to roll into a ball.

I landed on my back.

I had the wind knocked out of me.

My bones creaked an unpleasant sound. A spark shot through the back of my closed eyes, and a numbness spread through my entire body.

Oh, this is better.

The pain was so bad that in a way it felt good. I didn’t know I could feel that.

As I was thinking these stupid thoughts, my body started to slide. I was head down on a steep slope. I should have been able to grab something with my hands or feet, but since the ground was loose, anything I got a hold of just came down the slope with me. I wasn’t able to stop. Slowly but surely I went down the slope.

Eventually I made a conclusion about what was happening.

Was this not an earthquake?!

Tremors shook. The rocky mountain shook loosely. No, it was a strong shaking. That’s more accurate. It grew to a violent vertical shaking. I wanted to get up and stop sliding down the hill, but every time I tried to stand, I only slipped more. What was even worse, was now all the rocks and things were thrown about, so there was nothing I could use to slow my fall. The only question was how long and far would I go down the surface of the mountain.

“Gyaoan!”

Mugi roared. I rolled over. From the edge of my vision I could see Mugi’s jet-black figure.

He was coming to help. Over here! Bouncing with the rhythm of the tremors he jumped in great strides without slipping and falling, galloping closer to me.

Krrck!

The rocks were breaking. Right below me.

The mountain was splitting open. Kyaa! A chasm in the ground. The chasm would swallow me up.

I spread my arms and legs out as far as I could to fight from falling in. But, it was no use. Once I had tapped all my strength, I would crumble into the hole.

No! I didn’t want it to end like this.

Mugi flew.

He wedged himself between my back and the growing fissure.

His long tail reached my arm. I grabbed onto his tail and rolled onto my side. Pulling me onto his back, Mugi jumped.

The momentum forced me to lean forward on my stomach. Both hands hugged Mugi’s torso, and, straddling Mugi’s back, I clung for my life.

Stones, large and small, were tossed into the air all around us.

Mugi was struck several times in the abdomen. But Mugi never complained. He coolly made his way down the mountain.

Even though Mugi maintained his burden of me on his back all the way to the open space crowded with our car and the VTOL, it took a blink of the eye to get there.

I noticed a tunnel had formed at the front. Many fallen rocks were scattered around the tunnel’s entrance. Some had rolled as far as two meters. But it seemed the earthquake had finally stopped. The planet’s surface was no longer trembling and no new rocks were falling down.

I was swept with a wave of relief and I took a deep breath and pressed my

face into Mugi’s fur.

The base of Mugi’s tail was there.

Mugi’s face wasn’t.

Just to be sure, I stretched my neck out. On the other side of Mugi’s tail was Mugi’s rear end.

I concluded that I was facing backward. I hadn’t even realized that when I jumped onto Mugi’s back that I was going the wrong direction.

This position did not fit into my beauty profile.

I tried to dismount as quickly as I could.

My foot got twisted.

I lost my balance and fell shoulder first.

Once again, sparks flew. This time it didn’t reach the weird pleasurable feeling. It just hurt.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

I tried to get up as I moaned in pain. It was because Mugi wasn’t helping me up.

His shoulders raised up, and he scowled as he stared ahead.

I saw legs. They were strange-looking legs. It looked like they were dressed in thick tights for pants. The shoes, if that’s what you would call them, looked to be made of metal.

Had I seen this person before?

Wondering this, I tried to look up.

What I saw was someone wearing what looked like a medieval helmet and armor with a sword at his side. In his hand he held a narrow pistol of some kind.

That armor! That figure!

Unbelievable! Wasn’t this the same getup those “shadows” that had destroyed Damp Yu were wearing?

“Kei!” Yuri called out to me from somewhere.

“Yuri?”

I frantically looked around.

“Uwa!”

It was right when I looked up. Another armored warrior fell from the sky.

This one crashed into the one that was standing in front of me.

Both were laid out on the ground, broken.

There was no sound of metal-on-metal. This told me that these armored soldiers were the same as the “shadow” types we’d seen, and were wearing armor that only looked like metal. But these ones were much weaker than those “shadows.”

“Kei!” Yuri called again. I looked around for a second time.

There she was.

On top of one of the Pegasus’ wings. With her heatgun readied and her back to the white sun, she stood up confidently.

She sprang into the air.

She landed lightly, like a bird, just to my side.

Grr… That wasn’t cool. Not cool at all. Why am I falling off of Mugi’s back and Yuri is flying around like a gymnast?!

“Kei! Behind you!”

Yuri pointed behind the embarrassed and shrinking me.

“Wha—?”

And then right when I turned around…

“Hyaa!”

The armored warrior with the sword turned to me and thrusted his blade.

At the same time Yuri blasted a beam from her heatgun into his gut.

“Wha-wha-wha—?”

My eyes spun around like crazy.

“These are the guys that attacked us, once the earthquake stopped!” Yuri said hurriedly. “They got two men, but the mayor is safe. Hey! Snap out of it and get ready to shoot back! Without you we’re toast!”

Did she? What?!

I snapped my heatgun from its holster as I let out a deep breath. There was no time right now for tears and regrets.

3

There were eight armored warriors remaining. According to what Yuri’d said, they’d taken care of about six of them before I got there, so it seemed like there was a large number of them that suddenly appeared in this open space.

A burst of pulse beams rained down.

We rolled out of the way and jumped to the rear of the car to avoid the beams. The type of weapon the armored warriors were using were long-range automatic laser guns. You didn’t see these in close-range battles. That’s probably what they had the swords for. Those were more than likely specially made electromagnetic sabers.

I kept my back up against the rear wheel. It appeared that the armored soldiers were circling the open area. They had reached just outside the spot where I’d so gracefully dismounted Mugi. Our Mugi had sensed an abnormality and dove into the ring of circling warriors. He returned glares from a number of armored soldiers. Dumb cat! Why couldn’t you move when I needed you? That was a close one, you know!

“It’s a pretty close match with the security staff here,” whispered Yuri after crawling over to my side. “The heatguns work well on a frontal attack, but ray guns won’t help us at all here. They’d only work if we could hit a joint, and even then, who knows? They still won’t give us enough damage. If these guys are anything like the ‘shadows’ we saw before, then we are in deep trouble.”

I got it now. The security staff has nothing but ray guns. Thinking about it,

even though Yuri had borrowed a heatgun from the mayor, disaster still loomed over the collective group.

Pow pow pow… a barrage of bright beams flew. Before my eyes threads of light shot back and forth. Both sides were using ray guns. Understanding their disadvantage, the security staff was doing what they could to rise to the challenge.

I poked my head around the side of the car to see what the situation looked like.

At the same time, a barrage of pulse beams aimed at me came flying my way.

One of the beams grazed my cheek. With a high-pitched squeal the polymer evaporated.

“Hot! Hot! How-ch!”

I pulled my head back in a panic.

That was close. Shoosh. I really shouldn’t be so reckless. Up until a minute ago I could have stood up and not been shot at. Suddenly a strange beast came over the summit of the mountain. Its unexpected arrival must have taken the other side by surprise, as well This was actually to our advantage.

I got very interested in this new development.

“Ugraawr!”

From somewhere, Mugi let out a ferocious roar.

That growl.

He was angry. Really angry. He was in a rage. One of the armored warriors must have shot Mugi with a laser gun. He must not know Mugi’s penchant for slicing through flesh. Mugi has been acclimated to live with people, but when he gets angry, pre-domesticated Mugi rears his head. When he gets in that mode a hundred United Space Force Special Elite troops couldn’t contain him.

“No way! Cool!”

I heard Yuri squealing from somewhere above my head.

I looked up to see that at some point Yuri had climbed up the body of the car.

Lying across the roof, she looked out onto what was happening. Hmph, how'd she get so smart? Surely she had her heatgun out and ready. From up there it would be easy to fall back, and she had a good view of the enemy's movements. Not to be left out, I grabbed onto a protrusion on the car's body to pull myself up.

I hiked up my long slender leg to push myself up onto the roof. But right then!

"Aa!"

Yuri let out a little scream.

"They're coming! That way!"

She pointed a finger my way.

They're coming? Who's coming?

As Yuri said those words I immediately turned around to see. If enemies were on their way, I couldn't be caught in this precarious position. This was no time to be reckless.

Quickly I let go of the car.

Wait, wait, wasn't my leg still perched up on the car?

My field of vision spun around. I was just under a meter from the ground.

Again, I fell tailbone first.

Intense pain. Scream.

Crying, I pulled myself up. Not wanting to be chomped, I whipped out my heatgun.

"Don't shoot!" Yuri yelled, stopping me. I looked up. This same Yuri was blasting way with her own heatgun like crazy.

"Umigyaa!"

A black mass rolled up in front of me. I jumped back, but was still in the black ball's path. It grazed me and did a U-turn.

It was Mugi. It was Mugi coming our way. But, it wasn't Mugi alone. Someone was hanging onto his back. A slender man in a gray suit was straddling Mugi's

back and had his hands around his neck.

It was the mayor.

He timidly lifted his head from Mugi's back. He was a ghastly shade of pale. His hair was mussed up and his eyes were bloodshot.

"What in the world happened?" I asked the mayor.

"It was no use," he said, shaking his head. "The enemy got a fresh supply of troops. About twenty men. They got Burmis. And Leagan is injured. We were no match."

"Chk…"

I snapped my tongue. The armored warriors had reinforcements. This was the worst case scenario. And now we had to take care of the mayor, too. Protecting this twig of a man would take a lot of work.

The security staff would need to at least help out with that part.

I looked into the mayor's eyes, then at the Pegasus. The VTOL was in bad shape, but not completely out of commission.

"Mayor," I said. "You know how to fly that thing?"

"If it is just flying, then I have a license for that. But—"

"Okay!" I said quickly, cutting him off. If he had a license, then he had experience. The rest was up to luck.

"Mugi, get the mayor on to the Pegasus!"

"Wai-wait…"

No time for chitchat or protests.

With the mayor still on his back, Mugi jumped into the air. Yuri and I protected ourselves with our heatguns.

From the roof of the car Mugi jumped onto the wing of the Pegasus, then using his feelers, he lifted the mayor up. After opening the hatch, he tossed the skinny body of the mayor in.

"Gyaa!"

There was a bloodcurdling scream telling us that the mayor had made it aboard. At the same time Mugi stowed the gangway and shut the hatch.

Mugi turned around and returned to my side. Staring at the Pegasus, the fine hair where his ears should be started to oscillate.

The Pegasus' engine started. Yuri jumped from on top of the car. We both got low to the ground. The engine sound began to rise in pitch. The hot wind from the jets swirled around.

"Yuri!" I yelled, turning to her. He face was right in front of mine, but the engine noise was too loud. If I didn't shout she wouldn't be able to hear me.

"Once the Pegasus lifts off, we run to the tunnel. If we can attack from there, it's closer to a one-on-one battle!"

"Gotcha!" Yuri shrieked back. The Pegasus began to float. The landing gear went slack, and finally separated from the ground. Sand and dust blew up and danced in the air, and for a moment the whole scene was pure white. As the Pegasus rose it was surrounded by its own sandstorm. It was hard to keep my eyes open. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't even make out the Pegasus' form.

The engine sound shifted to a pitch higher.

It changed into a deafening metallic sound.

This sound slowly got quieter.

It was because it was gaining altitude. The wind from the exhaust was not shooting laterally, but straight down.

Now!

I tapped Yuri's shoulder and stood up.

I still couldn't see clearly, but the mine was close. I had a good idea of where it was.

We sprinted across the open area with all our might.

The Pegasus was in the distance. The wind died down, and the sand and dust settled back to the ground. The tunnel entrance was now visible to us.

Which meant…

The armored warriors could see us, too.

We flew into the tunnel entrance, and twisted to land with our backs to the tunnel wall.

That was close. As we pressed ourselves behind the wall, a flurry of laser blasts lit up the entrance to the mine.

The dark tunnel was briefly lit up in white light. The rocks around the opening created by the earthquake were glowing a bright red, and were starting to melt.

4

The downpour of laser bolts lasted for one or two minutes. There was nothing for us to do at that time but to wait it out and hope for the best. We couldn't move, much less counter. We could have moved down the wall farther down the tunnel, but there wouldn't have been much purpose to that. A better plan was to wait for the enemy to get careless. In any case, the steaming mad Mugi was still outside the mine.

Waiting for them to come to us was the way to go. For a moment I thought they were calling us out, but that didn't seem to be the case. There seemed to be a lot of movement outside. It got really noisy.

After a while we made our way back to the entrance, and avoiding the still-red and very hot melted rocks we took a peek outside.

The first thing I saw was something engulfed in a deep crimson flame. It was our six-wheeled car. The armored warriors must have set it on fire. The flames roared into the sky.

I then noticed Mugi just in front of me. The armored soldiers had surrounded Mugi. The red flames reflected against his bristled black fur, and he bore the look of a fierce and angry god. The four soldiers laid out on the ground near Mugi must have gotten too close. They weren't moving, or for that matter, breathing. Still, there were over twenty uninjured armored warriors remaining. Whether they were dead or behind the burning car, I wasn't sure, but the

mayor’s security staff was nowhere to be seen.

Three warriors from the circle of armored soldiers stepped forward. None of the warriors held laser guns. They carried their swords in their hands. That’s how close they were. It appeared that they realized their laser guns were no match for Mugi’s speed.

When they got about two meters from Mugi, they stopped their advance.

That’s really close.

Suddenly he jumped up.

Mugi was on his hind legs.

Mugi shoved the three armored shadows into one big pile.

Or so you would think at first.

Mugi’s lightning-quick sharp claws sliced through the three armored warriors, their bodies fell in pieces into a pile on the ground.

There was no contest, no challenge here. It was like an adult taking on a small child. Well, actually, that might even have been a more fair fight. It was more like a person stomping on ants.

Yuri and I had our heatguns in hand. Without aiming, or even really thinking, we blasted away indiscriminately. Overwhelmed already by Mugi’s power, the remaining armored soldiers had stood there staring blankly. It was our one chance to turn the tables on this battle.

We blasted the armored soldiers. We weren’t aiming, just shooting.

The warriors were caught off-guard. After getting sliced up by Mugi, suddenly they were being lit up with heat rays. Before they realized that the fire was coming from the inside of the tunnel, we used the confusion to make our escape.

Right at the perfect moment, Mugi got back onto all fours.

We leaped from the mine tunnel.

“Unh!” Yuri yelped. It was right when she lit up maybe five soldiers all at once. She never let off the trigger. But then the beams stopped flying. She was out of

power. The reserve tube was empty. This was the gun she'd borrowed from the mayor, and was a different brand than the one I was using. Her ray gun still sat in her holster, but no one knew more than Yuri that it would be little use against the armor of these warriors.

Our offensive strength was just cut in half. Poor Mugi. He'd come to us right when we became our weakest.

I couldn't take on all the remaining armored warriors with just my heatgun.

Before I knew it, Yuri had tossed out the Bloody Card. It was a playing-card-sized weapon made of Tegnoid steel. Each of the four edges are incredibly sharp, and it is powered by an ion drive to cut down enemies. It can be controlled by a handheld transmitter so the target of the Bloody Card can't get away.

However, against the armored warriors, the Bloody Card wasn't terribly effective. It was about as useful as a ray gun. If it was able to get between the joints in the armor, it could take out a warrior, but in any other spot it couldn't do anything against them. It was cutting the armor, but the armor was so thick that the Bloody Card couldn't reach flesh.

Since our offensive abilities were weakened, the warriors came at us even stronger.

Getting reorganized, they launched a brutal attack toward the tunnel. Dammit, Mugi! Why couldn't you just have taken care of all these guys in the open area instead of bringing them to us?!

But complaining wasn't going to turn the balance of this battle back to us. With the laser guns blasting at us, Mugi was threatened, too. The fighting Mugi was not about to jump out the tunnel entrance. He was nailed to the floor.

In situations like this there is only one thing to do.

Escape.

Yuri steered the Bloody Card back in.

"Inside! To the back! Hurry!" I shouted. My heatgun was keeping the armored soldiers from coming further, so I couldn't look behind me, but I could sense

that Yuri and Mugi had taken off running. I shot the heatgun with my left hand while I took out a capsule with my right. It was the same type I'd used at the CDC Headquarters building.

I flicked the capsule outside the tunnel entrance.

Before it hit the ground the capsule exploded into a fireball.

At the same time I turned away. I was off and running. Before the laser started chasing me I wanted to get as far away from the entrance as possible. The tunnel got pitch black as I got away from the opening. I couldn't hardly see my hand in front of my face. To make matters worse, the floor of the tunnel was rough and uneven. There were holes in the ground, throwing me off, but somehow I kept my balance, and kept running down the tunnel.

My shoulder hit the tunnel wall. The tunnel was curving. If I kept running I was going to crash. I put out both arms and fumbled forward.

It was a hard turn. The tunnel started descending. The darkness got even thicker. It was now absolute darkness. It was so dark you could almost feel it. Apparently the light shining in from the entrance couldn't make it around the corner. I could have really used night vision goggles, but as luck would have it, I had nothing like that on me. As it was, I was continuing on pure instinct.

Just as I made that determination I stumbled onto a ledge coming out of the ceiling. It extended in front of me diagonally. It went from my forehead all the way to the wall. I had my hands out, which cushioned any damage, but it still stung. It was impossible to run any further. I had to walk from here on out. I extended my hands out to my sides, and ran my fingers along the wall as I carefully proceeded, one step at a time.

Sloosh.

I stepped on something soft.

Surprised, I quickly pulled my foot back.

"Umigya!"

Mugi cried out.

Oh, it must have been Mugi's tail. That's what it felt like under my foot. But

shouldn’t Mugi be a lot farther ahead of me? What was he doing here…

“Is that you, Mugi?” I asked.

“Kei?”

From the darkness came not Mugi’s voice, but a response from Yuri.

“It’s so dark, I can’t see a thing,” I said. “Those guys are going to be right behind us if we don’t do something.”

No doubt the armored warriors were equipped with lights or heat detectors or something along those lines. They may even have had night vision goggles. This meant they could move a lot faster than we could at this pace. It was only a matter of time before they caught up to us.

“Why don’t you hop onto Mugi’s back?” suggested Yuri. “It’s easier for him if he doesn’t have to worry about us. That’s the vibe I got. That’s why we were waiting for you here.”

So that’s what was going on. I was more than a little moved. Well done, Yuri. Well done, Mugi. These were model partners. My heart grew warm. World-class idols.

“Hurry, jump on behind me…”

I felt Yuri’s outstretched hand on my shoulder. I grabbed onto her hand. Yuri pulled me closer and I felt Mugi’s body. Here was his tail. Here was his back. Hm, this must be Yuri’s rear end. I straddled Mugi’s spine. I wrapped my arms around Yuri’s waist and interlocked my fingers.

“We’re off. Keep your head as low as you can,” said Yuri. Who knew what was hanging from the ceiling? The braces sticking out from the wall were also dangerous. If you were to slam into one of those you would die, for sure. I bent down as low as I could, and pressed my cheek into Yuri’s back.

Mugi took off running. There was no sound from his paws and we were barely jostled around. And he was going really fast. I couldn’t see, but I could tell by the air brushing past my body. Yuri’s long black hair whipped around, tickling my left shoulder. On top of that, the roar of the wind was incredible. It howled in my ears.

This made me feel secure. At least that's what I thought at that moment. I had no idea how long the tunnel was or where it would lead, but at least we were putting distance between us and the attacking warriors. Then we would need to take a look at that crater, too. There must be some sort of clue there.

But.

It was too soon to act so relieved.

The armored soldiers had anticipated our moves.

5

It felt like we had been riding on Mugi's back for about twenty minutes.

The tunnel still went on. In distance we had gone maybe six kilometers. No, we had gone at least seven. But there was still no sign of an exit. In a word, Mugi was amazing. Here we were, draped in darkness going down a rough and unpredictable tunnel. But still, he carried two people on his back. I don't care if he's the strongest Mugi of his race, it must have been tiring. But still, our Mugi hadn't slowed one iota. With just his sensitive nose he cut through the darkness.

"Doesn't this feel like a maze?" I asked Yuri, pulling myself up and close to her ear. "We could be running around in circles through the same place over and over for eternity, never finding the way out, and—"

"Stop breathing on my neck," said Yuri interrupting me. What a cold response. I pulled myself down from her shoulder, frustrated. Wha-what got into her? I bit down on the base of Yuri's neck.

"Ouch!"

Yuri twisted her body. I started to tickle her.

She struggled back. She giggled and tried to bat me off.

The problem was I was bored. How long were we going to keep riding on Mugi's back? It would be one thing if I could see some gorgeous landscape or

have at least something to look at. But we were still stuck in pitch-black darkness. I couldn't even see myself, much less anything around me. Now that we had hit the thirty-minute mark, it wasn't unusual for a full-grown woman to get impatient.

So I was getting a little screwy, and I had to release some energy.

Naturally I wasn't going to mess with Mugi, the one carrying two people on his back all this way.

Even as his caretaker, there were certain lines I wouldn't cross.

I bet he thought that was true.

Mugi suddenly stopped.

He let out a low growl.

"Not good…"

I panicked.

"Kei, this is your fault!" Yuri quickly attacked. "You and your little games."

"C'mon, Yuri, you were enjoying it," I replied. I can't stand getting blamed for things that aren't my fault. She'd been playing along a second ago.

"Grrr…"

Mugi's growl grew stronger.

"Listen, this obviously isn't the time to get into it," said Yuri. Her voice was shaking. "This is the real deal."

"We better apologize," I said. "If Mugi were to dump us here, we'd be dead."

"I don't want to die!"

We agreed to apologize.

"Sorry, Mugi," we said in unison.

But, right then.

Mugi was ignoring us.

"Gurrrrr," Mugi growled again.

“Gyaaon!”

He suddenly roared. As he growled out, he jumped back about one meter.

Bright beams broke the darkness, lighting up wherever they struck, sending us to the wall.

Laser guns.

The bright lights exposed our position.

Accustomed to the darkness, the light made my head pound.

This was a big mistake. Mugi wasn’t mad at us. Sensing something out of the ordinary, he’d stopped moving to warn us.

Flashlights tore through the darkness. Not prepared for the bright lights after so long in the dark really threw a curveball to my optic nerves. Ouch! But I wasn’t going to let it get to me. Covering our heads with our arms we rolled off Mugi’s back.

We rolled up the wall and pressed our backs against the rock. I had already pulled out my heatgun.

“Uuwan!”

The now unburdened Mugi jumped straight to the heart of the enemy.

The light beams were suddenly darkened.

It became pitch black, again. The afterimages from the lights had been burned into my eyes. The streaks from the afterimages were crossed with pulses from a laser gun. In the darkness it was easy to hide, but also just as easy to be exposed by a light beam. That was painfully clear. But now we also knew where the enemy was. Taking aim, I squeezed the trigger of my heatgun.

The blast lit up the enemy and the wall together.

The rising flame momentarily lit up the tunnel.

I could see the enemy. The red flames reflected off their armor. It was them. I also caught a vision of a gaping hole in the tunnel wall. A short cut. They had cut us off and then waited for our arrival.

Mugi had kicked over a number of soldiers. Yuri sent the Bloody Card into the

air. The number of armored warriors was surprisingly low. Not all the warriors from the open area came. Maybe ten had pursued us. Or could this be a completely different troop of soldiers?

The flame burned out.

I fired twice more, and then three more times.

Mugi maneuvered himself between the light beams and my heat rays. Yuri kept the Bloody Card flying. She was going for the arms of the armored warriors carrying the laser guns. We knew it would be hard to kill them with the Bloody Card, but if it could eliminate some of the laser guns, that would be a big help. That alone would put us on the offensive. The battle only took a few minutes.

We wiped the floors with them. They didn't stand a chance.

The fight was over before it began. We got lucky that they had too few fighters in a narrow tunnel. The odds had rolled our way.

They were unable to return our attacks, and the battle had ended with the dense boom of an explosion.

The tunnel fell silent.

After checking on each other, we prepared to advance down the tunnel again.

Yuri took a flashlight from one of the fallen soldiers. Sometimes her sticky fingers come in handy. The light was off when Yuri picked it up, so we didn't know if it actually worked, but pressing the power switch sent a bright beam of light, piercing through the darkness.

Within the ring of light we could see the fallen armored warriors, their bodies strewn about, unmoving.

There were six bodies altogether.

The other soldiers must have retreated. They had also destroyed the shortcut through the side of the wall. A giant pile of rock and sand blocked the hole up. That was the explosion we'd heard. It wasn't pretty, but it had served its purpose.

Yuri and I went to take a closer look at the fallen soldiers. They were all dead. Two by the heatgun and four by Mugi. Among those, three had lost arms to the

Bloody Card.

“Grrrr…”

Mugi came to us. He was growling strangely. Yuri pointed the light at him.

Wow!

Maybe it was from the brightness of the light, as Mugi turned his head away as the light shone his way. One of the fallen soldiers was being carried in Mugi’s mouth. (To put it correctly, he was pulling the soldier from the nape of his neck, well, the fine details don’t really matter. Basically he was hanging from his mouth.) “Ugg…”

Mugi opened his mouth. The soldier flopped to the ground. “Nh… unh… nh…,” he moaned, looking straight up.

This could only mean—

He was still alive. This armored soldier wasn’t dead.

Nice work, Mugi! You just discovered a very valuable clue!



6

We rushed over to the soldier.

Lifting him up, we took off his mask. It doubled as night vision goggles. The lenses bulged out like the eyes on a deep-water ocean fish. We then removed the soldier's armor. Then we were able to see his uncovered face.

Yuri shined the light onto his head.

He was older than I'd expected. Older, but not elderly. I would have guessed him to be about forty years old at the most. He had deep creases in his face. His hair was a light brown and his eyes had an amber tone. Those eyes looked up blankly. We hadn't opened his eyes, they were already open, but they barely showed signs of life.

"Who are you?" I asked the soldier.

No response. A faint moan was all that trickled from his halfopen mouth.

Huh? How irritating. I slapped him across the cheeks five times, or so. I am not sure if it was due to my shock therapy, but a glitter of light glimmered in his pupils.

Before missing my chance I repeated my question.

"Who are you? Why are you wearing this?"

"Oo… ooaa… oo-oo…," the soldier groaned painfully.

"Answer me!" I insisted.

"Ooaa, Bo-Boralura…"

"Huh?"

I was perplexed. Boralura? What the hell was that? It sounded like some kind of name.

"Ab-absolute… Absolute…"

He spat the words out fearfully. This was starting to make sense. If I was right,

after “Absolute” should be “Children of God.” That was the group that followed the master, according to Landis.

“Kei, look at this!” said Yuri. She was pointing at the back of the soldier’s neck.

“It’s an ID tag!”

She was indicating a small gold-colored pendant around the soldier’s neck. On its face was engraved the soldier’s name, blood type, as well as the number of the ore group he belonged to. It also had Chakra Development Company’s name— The soldier’s name was Petrovich. He was a miner from Mine #11.

The armored warriors were actually CDC miners!

“Let’s get this guy outside,” I said. “If he regains consciousness we can start getting some answers.”

“Mugi, can you carry three?” asked Yuri. “This guy looks pretty heavy.”

“Let’s get him out of all this armor. That should lighten him up.”

“I wonder…”

Yuri didn’t trust me. Unlike metal armor, this special armor was made from a lightweight material. Removing it would only lighten him up by a couple kilos.

“Let’s ask Mugi,” I responded. “You got that flashlight, so if worse comes to worse we can walk, or we can take turns on Mugi, if he’s up for it.”

“Yeah, okay…,” said Yuri, obviously uncertain. This was dangerous. Once she decided to make a decision, this flip-flopper took at least two days to reach it. If I were to let her, she’d stand on that spot without moving for who-knows-how-long.

Instead of waiting for Yuri’s opinion I decided to get Mugi’s read. We still didn’t know how long this tunnel was. I was fine with walking, but preferred to ride on Mugi’s back if that was an option.

“Mugi…,” I turned to him and called his name.

Hey, hey, hey!

He’d been here a second ago, but now he was gone.

“Mugi! Where did you go?!”

I grabbed the flashlight from Yuri and shined it up and down the tunnel as panicked creases formed on my forehead.

I illuminated both the way we'd come from and the way we were going.

There he was! He was just a little ways down the tunnel. He was low to the ground staring at the wall. He was baring his fangs and his black fur stood on end. I couldn't hear his voice, but looking at his position, there was no question he was growling ferociously.

A cold sweat trickled down my back.

Mugi's mood. His actions.

It was the warrior's counterattack.

That was the first thing that came to my mind.

I quickly brought the light up to illuminate the wall he was facing. If it really was the armored warriors mounting another attack there should be another hole in the tunnel wall, or something like that there.

At least I thought so, but there was nothing there. Just the plain wall. So Mugi was having a standoff with a wall. But he was still acting as if there were some terrible monster there.

Another cold shiver moved down my spine.

If it wasn't the armored warriors, then it must have been something else… something worse. It could be an unseen enemy that could pounce on us from the wall, or maybe the ceiling There was only one creature I knew that fit that description.

"Gyaon!"

Mugi jumped. Getting a good push off the ground, he got up high.

I was right.

"Yuri! The fangs!"

I laid Petrovich down and stood up. Without thinking Yuri also jumped up.

I then turned off the flashlight.

My body was slammed from behind.

I rolled down the now completely dark tunnel. Stopping at the wall I pulled out my heatgun and held it to my chest.

Not the wind, but something blew through the tunnel. The pressure pressed my body back. It was hungry for blood, the evil body of this invisible beast.

“Gyawaoo,” Mugi cried. He bayed and chased after the fangs.

What could the fanged creature be trying to accomplish? Was it getting us? Or was it…

“Hyee!”

There was a scream. From the back of the darkness. It came from where I was a few moments ago. That voice. It wasn’t Yuri?

It was the death cry of a man.

So that was the target.

With no hesitation, I turned on the flashlight. I quickly scanned the area looking for Petrovich. He was there. Yuri was with him. I didn’t see Mugi anywhere. He had chased the invisible fangs into the darkness.

“Kei!” Yuri called me. Keeping the heatgun ready, I ran over to Yuri.

“It got him.”

Yuri was propping up Petrovich’s torso.

Petrovich’s body was covered in blood. There was a giant bite taken out from his side. His head, neck, chest, and abdomen. Scooped out of his armor. This was an adult-sized monster, as there were only the marks of two giant teeth. Yet his body had been ravaged. The reason he wasn’t cut completely in half must have been because Mugi’d started to chase the fanged monster.

“Mgyau… fu… fo… fu…”

Mugi had returned, breathing heavily through his nose. It appeared it had gotten away again. Along with Mugi, Yuri and I stood up from Petrovich’s body, dispirited. Right when we had a strong witness literally in our hands, in the blink of an eye he was gone. It hit us pretty hard.

“I guess we just leave him here,” said Yuri. She was talking about Petrovich’s remains. I hadn’t thought about it until that point, but she was right. We wouldn’t have anything to gain from trying to bring his body out.

“Shall we get going?” I said to Mugi, after pausing a few moments to calm my nerves. Mugi got down on his knees, making it easier for us to get up on his back.

Yuri straddled Mugi’s back first. Then I was about to jump on.

It was right at that moment.

It came with a whoosh.

For a second I thought I was dizzy. I was exhausted from lack of sleep. That’s what it felt like, at least.

But that wasn’t the problem.

It came again with a rumble.

It was a violent vertical shake.

I realized then that it wasn’t vertigo. It was an earthquake. This wasn’t what happens when you are dizzy.

I reached out to Mugi to use his body as support.

But I made a mistake.

My outstretched hand touched nothing but air. I had misjudged the distance.

I lost my balance and fell forward.

Aah! Maybe I really was dizzy…

7

No matter how hard I tried to, I couldn’t keep myself up. Not only had I lost my balance from leaning forward, but my legs were thrown by the tremors. I had no way to stop myself from losing my footing.

I casually floated through the air. It was a perfect head over heels tumble.

I crashed to the ground.

That had to be the same spot where Yuri'd slipped off Mugi too. Perfect timing.

Unh!

Her big butt landed right on my slim belly.

"That was an aftershock!" shouted Yuri, still on top of me. Who cares?! First things first! Before you start yelling stuff, get the hell off of me!

We could hear the sound of rocks cracking and the mountain breaking up. This was a huge earthquake. The tunnel floor was moving up and down like pistons in an engine.

Rocks and sand rained down like a waterfall.

That's when I finally realized it.

We were in a tunnel. The mountain the tunnel was cut into was collapsing. Dirt and rocks falling in the tunnel meant…

We were going to be buried alive.

A rock fell from the roof of the cave and struck me in the wrist, knocking the flashlight from my hand.

The moment it left my fingers, the flashlight went dark. It was crushed under falling rocks.

Back to darkness. But now we had nowhere to escape to. Inside the rock tunnel, the very idea of finding a place to avoid the falling rocks was absurd.

I gave up. Let fate play this hand. If it was us versus the mountain then there was nothing we could do to change the odds. Take us now.

At this moment of extreme desperation, something soft spread over Yuri and me. I tried to feel what it was with my hands.

Big, soft, warm.

Of course! It's Mugi! Mugi had covered us with his body to protect us from

the falling rocks and debris.

But if the entire tunnel collapsed, it wouldn't be much use.

The extreme pessimist in me had a hard time seeing an upside to this turn of events.

At least half a minute had gone by and the earthquake continued.

The sound of falling rocks and stone being crushed resonated through the darkness. I was completely resigned to the fact that this tunnel was going to collapse eventually. Yuri lost it. Lying on the floor she was doing some sort of horizontal ballroom dance by herself.

While she writhed gracefully, the earthquake gradually settled down.

Mugi got up, off of us.

"Mgya."

With my eyes firmly shut tight, I held Mugi's head with both hands. He was trying to tell us to get up. An aftershock might come or maybe we were in the quiet calm before the big storm, so to speak.

I slowly lifted my head up.

Please… please don't let a big rock fall on me now.

I mumbled to myself as I slowly opened my eyes.

Light. I blinked my eyes repeatedly. I wasn't able to open them all the way.

Squinting, I examined our surroundings. Yuri was to my side. Yuri was sitting up and staring dumbfounded behind me.

Huh?

Light? I can see Yuri?

It's actually bright out!

I tried to get Yuri's attention.

Her eyes were two dots. Her mouth was forming words, but no sound came out.

An opening. A giant hole. In the tunnel wall.

It must have opened up during the earthquake. That final rumble that I thought would be the end of our lives in this world was the opening of this gaping hole. What do you know? It was less than ten meters from where we were huddled under Mugi. Just a tiny bit closer and the closing credits would have been rolling up the screen. For sure. A cold sweat suddenly covered my body.

"Grrrr,"

Mugi let out a low growl as he quietly walked toward the edge of the hole. The hole was about five meters wide. Almost as wide as the tunnel itself. Bright light came streaming in through the hole obliterating the darkness of the tunnel. Looking that way at Mugi hurt my eyes to the point that tears were starting to form. But not turning away, I felt that something was strange about this light. It was frightfully white. It didn't feel like it was flowing in naturally but was inserted into the darkness.

"Nyagau," Mugi moaned as he turned his head. It seemed that he wanted us to follow him.

Yuri and I looked at each other.

"I think Mugi has something to show us," I said.

"I think I've already seen it all," Yuri replied strongly.

We stood up together and walked over to the front of the hole.

Standing near the edge, we poked our necks through the hole to see what was on the other side.

"Ah!"

"Aah!"

Nothing could have prepared us for what we saw. Nuts! I should have bet Yuri when she said she had seen it all. She certainly couldn't have expected this!

What we saw through the other side the whole was…

A giant black egg.

It was the same black egg we'd seen in our clairvoyant vision!

I couldn't tell how far we were from the black egg. I guessed within one kilometer. The cliffs and rough terrain continued from here all the way to the black egg, and the rock formations actually appeared to form a sort of monument, a pillar holding up the egg. The sky was covered in a thick grayish fog, and no blue poked through that I could see. Naturally, I couldn't see the sun, either. In one part the fog covered the surface of the ground, and as the colors were so close it was hard to tell where the rocks ended and the fog began. It was a cold monotone vision.

The scene looked like an India ink drawing.

The egg was huge. Truly gigantic. With nothing to compare it to, it was hard to be more accurate than that. I would put the height at over 300 meters, easily. If this was really the living egg of some unknown creature, I surely didn't want to meet whatever had laid it.

"Kei…"

The silent Yuri spoke. Her speech sounded forced, yet was barely a whisper.

"If that is the same egg we saw, then… then we are seeing the… seeing the key to the case now."

"I think seeing it is all that we should be doing, if that."

"Yeah, but," she said, gaining her voice, "it isn't like it's going to just sit here like this forever." She took her ray gun from her holster. "The hole in the wall those soldiers who were waiting for us made is right over there."

"And also the place where the invisible jaws arrived."

I readied the heatgun.

"Grrrr…"

Mugi got low to the ground and his feelers whipped through the air.

It was anticipation for battle.

We had no choice but to move forward.

To see where the hole was on the side of the mountain, I would need to lean through the hole to check.

Yuri held onto me as I timidly stuck my head through the hole. What the—?

I breathed a sigh of relief.

It wasn't nearly as bad as I had imagined. It was only four or five meters. After we could get down, a ridge continued unbroken to the pedestal the egg stood on. Thankfully the ridge wasn't narrow like a sword's blade, so it wouldn't be a balancing act getting there. The only problem was whether or not we had the energy to get there. What was I saying? If it was too far, we always had Mugi.

I gave Yuri the sign and she pulled me back in, and then we went back into the tunnel. I told Yuri what I'd seen.

"We can go the whole way on that ridge."

Yuri nodded her head.

"The only thing I am worried about is that fog," I said. "If we can't see through it when we are on the ridge, then it will be difficult to move. No matter how wide it gets, a ridge is still a ridge. If we aren't careful we could fall down to the bottom of the ravine."

"Waa! That sounds painful!" Yuri exclaimed, bringing her hands to her mouth, giving a frightful look. Hmph. Silly Yuri. Of course it would hurt!

"Let's get moving," I said, ignoring Yuri's mock fear. "And don't tumble off the low cliff."

Turning on my heel, I stood at the edge of the hole. I bent over to get ready to jump down from the hole.

It was as if they were waiting for me to do this.

A head popped up.

The ashen-colored helmet of the armored soldiers.

Not just one or two. Lined up at the edge of the hole were seven armored warriors. From the cliff below the hole they suddenly were right in front of me.

Like a line of Jack-in-the-boxes.

I was truly taken off-guard.

“Hoyaa!” I cried, jumping back. It’s a miracle I wasn’t scared stiff.

The warriors surged. Brandishing their laser guns, they swooped up in through the hole.

“Grrr!”

From out of nowhere, Mugi was suddenly standing in front of us. He bared his fangs and glared at the soldiers with a fiery rage. I pulled out my heatgun. Yuri holstered her ray gun and innocently held the Bloody Card between her fingers. Our position wasn’t so bad. They had a cliff to their backs, and a single digit number of men.

And then at that moment.

“This is where it ends. Gods of Destruction…”

A voice rang out from behind us.

We spun around.

Shadows seeped forward out of the darkness.

There were at least ten of them. No. Double that number.

A leader stepped forward. They were all armored warriors.

But the apparent leader wasn’t wearing armor. Instead he was draped in a loose white robe. On his face he wore an eerie silver mask. It was smooth with no facial features.

Master.

The armored soldiers moved quickly, surrounding us.

The master slowly came closer to us. But it didn’t seem like he was walking. It was more like he was sliding across the surface of the ground. At least that’s what it seemed like. I wanted to see what was under that robe. I wondered what his legs looked like. But his body was completely covered by the robe, and I got no hint as to what was underneath.

“So the leading actor finally makes his entrance,” I said, facing the master. “The master of the invisible fangs, who created an armored army of miners,

who turned a mountain of ore into a crater, and who killed the sheriff and the owner. Wait. That's not all. You are also the one who found out we were coming and sent assassins to Lyonesse, am I wrong?"

"…"

"Tell me. What is your aim? Is it money? Power? Or is it all for Buddha?"

"…"

No response.

"C'mon, speak up!"

I readied the heatgun to the master's chest and took a quick step forward. Naturally, this was a bluff. Surrounded by all these soldiers, there was no means of escape. That's why I acted like we had the upper hand.

"The opposite sex is nice, Gods of Destruction," the master said quietly. Since he had no mouth I wasn't totally sure that the voice came from the master, but my gut told me that he was the one speaking. It was the same voice that had called out a few moments earlier.

"But your female forms are not going to be enough to allow you to move," he continued. "The deception is over. We are going to sacrifice you to Boralura. Consider it an honor."

Boralura! That's the name that Petrovich had mumbled before the fangs tore him up.

"Can you not change the subject?" Yuri said. She held up a Bloody Card in each hand at shoulder-level, ready to send them flying at a moment's notice.

"You should see that your life is in our grasp. Between Kei's heatgun and my Bloody Cards, we are going to be the ones killing you!"

Wow, Yuri. Those are some pretty severe words coming from such a cute face.

"Hm. That's funny," the master said calmly. "You should test your theory. You'll find those cards won't do you any good."

"You asked for it!"

Yuri’s cheeks were flushed.

Taking a step forward Yuri released the two Bloody Cards which went sailing straight toward the master.

The master’s robe expanded out to the left and right. Apparently he had spread his arms out.

The cards flew in an arc, and came down at the master from above at two steep angles.

The master didn’t even try to escape. Buzzing through the air, the deadly cards closed in on their target, but like a white shadow, the master stood frozen. I felt not an ounce of sympathy for him.

Despite the pending imminent danger, neither the leader nor his soldiers moved a muscle.

The Bloody Cards tore through the white robe, and then through the master’s flesh.

Or right when I thought that was the case…

The master lit up brightly.

9

To put it correctly, what lit up was the master’s mask and robe. It only lasted for a moment, but it was so bright, so very bright that I couldn’t tell what was what.

It was an incredible flash. It was pure white, and felt like it had strength, a power of its own.

Robe of light. Mask of light. But all I could see at this point was white light dancing spastically. My vision was of only white, white, white.

It might be best to explain it as an explosion, and all of the fragments and rubble were glowing shards of light.

It wasn't like a continued shine, but like whatever was hit with the light then lit up too, and it spread outward that way.

All I saw was darkness and goose bumps rose on my skin. I couldn't move. I was under the light's spell. I couldn't say my muscles were in pain. But I still couldn't see. My eyes were tightly shut, and my left hand covered them, but that didn't stop the light from beaming all around. We were at the mercy of this angry light that was determined to torment us.

A scream tore through my ears. It might have been from Yuri, but on the other hand, it could have been my scream. I couldn't even tell that much.

This was the limit. The end.

Sa-sanity slipping.

Soul—My soul being torn away.

Like that, the light went out.

Huh?

That was anti-climactic.

It was all over too quick.

It was like we had entered the eye of a hurricane.

With my eyes firmly shut I couldn't see what was going on, but my body could sense that the light storm had subsided. It was because I could feel the push, the pressure from the light subside. That was how tremendously powerful this light was.

I put down my arms and slowly opened my eyes.

My muscles had stiffened and my joints creaked.

The master stood in the same place and in the same position. His robe was not shredded and his body had sustained no injuries or damage.

The Bloody Cards were nowhere to be seen. The fact that the master was uninjured meant that the Bloody Cards had never reached him.

I scanned up and down the tunnel. I was looking to see if the flying cards didn't fly down the tunnel or fall to the floor.

My eyes fell upon my right hand, and couldn't be torn away.

The hand that held the heatgun pointed at the master.

The heatgun had been sliced in half.

Everything past the trigger guard was gone. The grip was untouched, but the barrel was… gone. Did it melt? When the light was whipping around?

The white light. Material exposed to the white light melted and evaporated.

The thought was sobering.

The crater. That is the same as the crater. A giant circular white light had melted the rocky mountain, making it into a tanned mirror-surfaced crater. The master had just shown us the tip of the iceberg of his power.

I tossed the now-useless heatgun aside. Since we'd lost the Bloody Cards the only real weapon we had between us was the ray gun in Yuri's holster.

"Grrrr…"

Mugi took a step forward.

His leaned into a hunting posture and gave a low growl.

"So there you are," said the master in a quiet demeaning tone.

A tone that Mugi could read.

"Gaao!"

Anger. He exposed his fangs and his whole body vibrated with tension. The muscles in his shoulders rose up like two small mountains.

His legs lowered, building up energy.

He kicked off the ground, bounding into the air at the master.

The master's right hand moved.

An electric bolt shot out in every direction.

It branched and spread. Mugi's body was hit by a spark.

The electric bolt connected. "Gyaan!" Mugi cried.

I couldn't believe it. I had never heard such a miserable cry.

Enveloped in the lightning, he fell to the ground.

Snap! The lightning hissed and crackled.

Mugi writhed within the electric net, but the net didn't break or disappear.

"There's no way out," the master muttered and laughed. "This net was specially made for catching Mugis. Any attempt to use the Mugi's power to manipulate electricity or electromagnetic energy only makes it stronger."

Wha-wha—? This guy knew all that about Mugis. And then he took that knowledge to make a weapon to counter a Mugi attack.

"You may be Gods of Destruction, but against me you are powerless." The master lifted his head up slightly.

The ring of soldiers around us closed in.

"Don't come any closer!"

Yuri lifted the ray gun.

"Stupid girl!" the master spat out.

The armored soldiers lifted their arms out to us in unison.

I heard a whooshing sound.

A sweet smell filled my nose.

Then it hit me.

Gas. That's what I thought.

That's when it started working.

The world started spinning. And spinning. Faster.

I lost consciousness.

…

Opening my eyes was surprisingly easy.

I wasn't nauseous and my head wasn't pounding.

I actually woke up feeling well rested and pretty dam good. I admired the high quality of that knock-out gas. I hadn't lost any of my memory, either. It was my

first good sleep in a long time. Good stuff!

After opening my eyes, I naturally wanted to stretch my body.

I couldn't. My arms and legs wouldn't move.

Looking around, I was able to get a picture of the situation. I was bound up to a light metal alloy cross-shaped pillar with electromagnetic manacles. It was different from a typical cross on the lower half of the vertical pillar. The bottom half was split in two. So my legs were spread about forty degrees and individually bound.

Hmph, a rather tasteless way to bind up a lady. My face turned red with embarrassment.

To my right was Yuri. She was awake, and looking around, too.

Beyond Yuri was a black wall. But it wasn't a wall. It was our giant egg standing there.

It was so big that it looked like a wall. Apparently the Absolute Children of God carried us from the tunnel to here.

Right in front of the black egg, there appeared to be a structure made of stone. The naked pillars revealed a majestic design, and reminded me of something I might have seen as an art student studying ancient religious ruins. Maybe these were the real deal. Though I doubted they were actually ancient.

This was a sacred place for the egg, or it was here first and the egg ate up whatever was the focus of worship. At least that's what it looked like. We were about 50 meters from the entrance of the temple (if that's really what it was), and whether our position on the crosses in relation to the egg and the temple had any significance wasn't obvious yet.

In front of the temple was a wide stone plaza. Where the crosses stood would have been on the left-hand edge of the stone plaza if you were looking from the temple. Beyond the stone plaza was dirt. The ground beyond the plaza was forty or fifty centimeters lower than the plaza stones.

On the ground there stood the Absolute Children of God lined up.

To our side there were about fifty lines of people, probably in about ten rows.

Which would make approximately five hundred followers. The owner hadn't been kidding about how many believers the master had.

Could it be that almost all the miners were believers? Or else there was a sudden influx of members, maybe?

All the believers wore blue robes similar to the style of the master's. Only the final line of fifty was made up of armed, armored warriors.

All the followers had their heads bowed to the ground and were repeating some kind of chant in unison in a low voice… Ohooh… Ohooh. I couldn't quite tell what they were saying but it might have "Boralura."

"Kei…," Yuri called out to me. "Look at the sky."

"Hn?"

I turned my gaze upward.

The sky was completely filled with the gray fog. It was the same fog we'd seen from the tunnel earlier.

"There never seems to be a break in the mist," said Yuri. "That's why this place was never discovered by the mayor's precious satellite."

"That's probably the case," I said nodding in agreement. I mean, look at the size of that egg. Even without a spy satellite, it should have been discovered before now. A light plane could have found it. The fact that no one had even heard or talked about it before told me that this fog above was placed there to hide it. So, in the end, the fog was manmade. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to continue like this.

"Ah!"

Yuri, who was facing me, made a tiny shriek.

"The believers are looking up, now."

"Huh?"

I turned to look.

It was just like Yuri had said. The followers, who had all been looking at their feet were now all gazing at the temple with their hands pressed together in

prayer.

I got it.

They were expecting someone to appear from the temple, I guessed.

I quickly turned my head back and forth. This was calisthenics. Nothing else.

My guess was right on the money.

From the back of the temple the form of a person appeared. Since we were high up, we could look down and see pretty clearly.

There wasn't just one silhouette. There were two. They stood shoulder to shoulder. I guessed one was the master, but who could the second person be? Don't tell me there are more string-pullers behind all this.

The forms came through the gateway.

"Uwaa!"

I was blown away.

One of the forms was, indeed, the master. Just as before, he was draped in a white robe and moved as if he was sliding rather than walking.

And then there was the other person. This was the real problem.

He was standing next to the master.

He was tall. He had broad shoulders. He had long legs. He wore a blue checkered shirt. He wore faded blue jeans. He had almost transparent blond hair. And, finally, he had a very handsome face.

It was… It was Jeff.

Jeff!

The handsome sheriff.

He was alive!

4

if there's one thing I hate, it's alternative dimensions!

Jeff and the master made their way to the center of the plaza.

"Jeff!" I called out to him.

His jumped and looked my way.

His legs stood frozen. His eyes opened up wide.

Our eyes met. Those bright blue eyes. They were beautiful enough to elicit a deep sigh. And what those sparkling beauties were gazing at was, of course, me. Me and me only.

And then Jeff called out.

"Yuri!"

Wha—

Shock. Off the scale. It was like my head had been broken open with a hammer. All the energy in my body poured out my toes. I had lost all willpower, too. Consciousness was fading.

"Kei!"

He then quickly called my name. But it was too late. I had already died. Stupid jerkhead. It's not that easy to revive the dead.

Jeff glanced to his left at the master. Then, as if he had made a difficult decision, he set off running in our direction.

The master's robe stretched out toward Jeff.

"Jeff! No!"

Seeing the scene play out, I was completely resuscitated. I needed to know what the master was up to. Jeff didn't need another death to add to his problems.

A finger extended from the master's robe.

Aimed at the running Jeff's back, the fingertip glowed brightly.

Electricity shot from his finger. It was different than the electric net that trapped Mugi. It was more like the pulse of a laser gun. Intermittent bursts reached Jeff.

"Gya!"

Jeff bent backward as the light blue bolts struck his spine.

The muscles in his back forcing him to stand on tiptoe, both his arms shot forward. His fingers wiggled, trying to grab something that wasn't there. His arms went into convulsions.

"Jeff!"

I twisted in my bound position atop the cross. Really, this couldn't be more annoying. I wanted to break these bonds and run to Jeff. Dammit. Dammit. Why did he have to be so hot?

Jeff's body went stiff. The convulsions had stopped. He wasn't moving at all. He stood there as if he was frozen. Because of the obvious pain, his gallant expression faded, yet his arms reached out longingly in my direction. His stance reminded me of a statue of a warrior from an ancient age.

The master lowered his hand and the robe returned to normal.

He passed in front of the frozen sheriff. There was nothing Jeff could do. He still appeared to be conscious, as his lips were trembling. His eyes were also blinking.

The master came to the edge of the plaza. Directly across from us. He stood about twenty meters away. He had completely ignored us. As loud as I had been yelling, he hadn't even glanced in our direction. Standing in front of his five hundred followers, he raised his arms out. Again, the robe grew and spread out wide.

“My children…,” said the master in a clear and booming voice. “The opportunity has come. The sacred battle against the heathen from a faraway land has begun. The leaders of the foreigners don’t believe as we believe, and they sent Gods of Destruction to our sacred land. But we have dropped the iron hammer of justice on them. The symbol of the intolerable foreign heathen, the mines of Gautama, have vanished for eternity. Unfortunately, the leader of the heathen slipped out of our grasp, and the Gods of Destruction smashed our iron hammer.”

“Hmm,” I nodded to myself. Now the pieces were starting to fit together. The accident at Mine #4 had been the bait. It had been a lure to bring in the owner and the mayor, along with the two of us, and then nab us all in one fell swoop. But the mayor had escaped, and we’d been late in getting there. That’s when the armored warriors were called in.

“But look! The Gods of Destruction are sitting in our hands.” The master’s speech wasn’t over.

“Furthermore, the most powerful of those demons we have bound up here.”

The master turned and pointed in our direction. The gaze of the followers followed his finger. There must be something behind us that we hadn’t seen. I turned my head around as far as I could to see what he was talking about.

There was something there.

Something black and round and surrounded in some kind of lightning net.

This.

Isn’t this Mugi?

He must have been tossed there so that we wouldn’t be able to see him. He was still trapped in the electric net, slumped over on the ground. Poor Mugi! Trapped by his own energy, it was too hard to watch.

What’s that? I looked closely.

Out past where Mugi was. A dreary rocky mountain range surrounded the flat plateau where we were.

In one of the hills was a hole.

The entrance to the tunnel.

A plate was affixed above the entry way. The number 16 was engraved into the plate.

Mine #16.

So this was one part of a mine. Okay, so the master met Boralura in a mine, and then received his weird powers, and built the temple. Showing off his powers to the miners created a growing population of believers. The dead old man, Galbaldy, must have been getting ready to double-cross or betray the master.

The true tragedy was the owner. All this was happening on his own mining grounds, and he had no idea what was going on. And these followers truly believed in what the master was saying.

“The fate of the pagans has been decided. They will be crushed under our feet. They will cry out of shame for their sins.” The master’s voice grew noticeably higher.

“When we offer up the sacrifice of these Gods of Destruction, then Absolute God Boralura shall descend to this world and become one with his Absolute Children. Then all of space will be ours. Mankind is on the path to destruction. We have grasped the future. Now we shall be the leaders of all of space!”

The believers gave a collective cheer. Here and there the Children of God spoke out Boralura’s name.

“The blood of the Gods of Destruction for the Yaksha!”

The master yelled as he looked up to the sky.

“The flesh given to the cursed beasts!”

“Yuri…”

I looked over at my partner on the other cross. The two crosses were lined up close to each other. So close, in fact, that the edges of the two crossbeams were almost touching.

“Kei…”

Yuri looked back at me. I could tell by her eyes that Yuri had come to the same conclusion that I had.

This was not a good situation to be in.

We had no weapons. Mugi was out of commission. We were strung up on crosses, and our last ray of hope, the sheriff, was frozen stiff. I couldn't see any way out of this.

"It was a rough life, huh?"

I stretched out the fingers of my right hand as far as I could. It would be my version of a goodbye handshake. Even if it was only the tip of one finger, I wanted to touch Yuri's hand. The shackles had my wrists clamped down pretty tight, but I thought I might be able to reach her.

"It's times like this I wished I had taken my diet more seriously." As Yuri spoke these bizarre words she also stretched her pointer finger as far as she could.

And then at the same time our bodies shook as if suddenly hit by an electric shock.

The energy pushed through my body with a powerful force. Right when I thought this was it, there was an explosion. Without thinking, I shut my eyes. The bright flash exploded into the back of my brain. That. This was that.

Clairvoyance.

It often happened at times like this. Why always at the most inconvenient moments?!

Everything went white. The floating sensation had come. A feeling of ecstasy flowed through my body. Every cell in my body grew warm.

White. Everything was white.

To the white world.

An ashen-colored stone.

A strange shape. A person, an animal.

This was not a rock. Not a rock, but metal. I've seen this before.

Angel of Chakra.

That’s it. It’s the Angel of Chakra. At the mayor’s mountain retreat was where he showed it to us.

Another vision appeared. Ugly. A creature. A living creature. A beast so ugly it almost made me nauseous. It was big and round and its skin was a slimy pink. It was covered in splotchy black specks. They formed a pattern. It was a dirty and unattractive pattern.

The ugly beast opened its mouth.

Half of the creature’s body was mouth.

It got even uglier.

It came closer.

This giant creature with a huge gaping mouth came closer to us. In front of us was the Angel of Chakra, but the creature didn’t look at all concerned.

It slammed into the Angel of Chakra.

There was an explosion.

The white world turned red with flames.

The flames quickly got darker.

Then they turned completely black.

The black flame spread.

Consciousness…

The darkness engulfed us.

2

I was back in my body.

“…my own children. Continue keeping Boralura in your minds. The Absolute God is your father. The Absolute God is the king of the new world…”

The speech was still going. As his robe whipped in the wind, the master

fervently delivered his words.

Yuri and I both sighed and looked at each other. My body felt listless. My brain felt like it had shut down.

“We are done for,” said Yuri softly. “It’s never been like this before. We can’t even tell what our visions mean.”

She was right. We had experienced a lot of firsts. The enormous power we’d run into two times was a first. Also, going into a trance just from the tips of our fingers touching was a first. I mean, if we could be sent into and out of trances so easily, we would never be able to return to a normal life. Oh yeah, and we had never seen a vision so clearly before. Usually it would have finished about the time we saw the Angel of Chakra. No, even that was more concrete than what we usually see. But, well… that’s fine, though. The real issue was that even though the vision was really clear, we still didn’t know what it meant. This alone was exhausting.

My head felt like it was full of nothing but air. My vision grew hazy. My ears were ringing.

Of all these, the ringing was the worst. It sounded like a metallic “Kee—” but really loud. And it wasn’t letting up. Even worse, just when I thought it might be fading away, the volume actually went up.

I shook my head as hard as I could. Yuri seemed to be in the same condition as her long black hair was all disheveled as she rotated her head around her neck over and over. I glanced and noticed that the Children of God were also suffering from the same problem. Some were grabbing their ears, and others were shaking their heads. What the hell was going on? Huh? Was it not my ears ringing? Could it be a real metallic noise we all heard?

The master was gazing up to the sky. He appeared to be in a state of confusion. His eyes darted around.

I looked up at the sky, too. I couldn’t move my head back very far, so I couldn’t see the entire sky.

The sky was still filled with same gray-white fog. It had lowered in the sky, and the wind was whipping it around in a giant circle.

The metallic sound got more and more intense.

But I couldn't see anything. All I could see was the fog. It was the same for the master, as his gaze jumped back and forth searching over the sky.

The sound grew into an explosive roar. Thinking about it, it reminded me a little of a Shooter, the highly maneuverable one-person flyer. Only louder. No way… There's no way.

"Ah!"

Without thinking a yelp had escaped my lips.

The fog broke.

Right above us.

At first I thought the clouds were making black shadows, but it turned out to be a silver ship, and it was flying at a ferocious speed.

A highly maneuverable flyer. It wasn't a Shooter, but there was no mistaking. It had smallish wings and a flat fuselage. It was moving too fast for me to see its exact type or any markings.

One by one more fighters appeared. The fog was pockmarked with holes. On top of that three saucer-shaped ships fell through the clouds. Could these be command ships, or maybe some kind of transport? They were much bigger and moved slower than the fighters, and flew in a spiral pattern as they dropped altitude.

All of the flyers flew outside my range of vision. The sonic boom rattled my eardrums. I heard the roar continue from my rear right to my rear left. I could hear them banking.

Eight fighters flew over my head.

They then quickly turned around to come back. They were at a lower altitude than before.

They pounded the ground with laser cannon fire.

Not where the believers were assembled, but in an area of the plaza where no person stood exploded in fire.

This was a warning shot.

The shockwave thundered through the ground.

A blast of air hit us diagonally from above.

I wouldn’t call it painful.

More like almost deadly.

This repeated a total of eight times.

It was getting hard to breathe.

Next the saucers came lower. Above the plaza two of the saucers had round openings in their centers open up.

Then olive-drab painted tanks descended from the saucers. They had giant beam cannons attached to them. But after getting a better look, I could see these weren’t tanks. I realized that after they fired their repulsor rockets to slow their decent. Along with the cannon, they had what looked like arms and legs. In what would be their hands each carried a larger version of a hand blaster.

Their purpose became clear.

These were mobile infantry. Not any mobile infantry, but the unrivalled high-speed mecha-powered suit variety of mobile infantry.



But.

This couldn't be true. I couldn't believe what I saw. What were these infantrymen doing on the remote mining planet of Chakra? If the GNP of a planet-state is low, they can't support a standing army. In those cases they are dependent on the United Space Force. From the two saucers four mobile infantrymen descended, two per ship with open doors. Don't disparage the fact there were only four of them. Four of these were the same as the strength of tens of thousands of normal military troops.

"Rakshasa!" screamed the master, turning from the sky to face his followers. "Go! Take care of those pagans!"

With a collective whoosh the fifty armored warriors to the rear of the believers stood up. Ooh! The armored warriors are called Rakshasa. If they were the same as the "shadows" that attacked Danp Yu then the mecha-power suits should have pretty even odds, even if it was fifty versus four.

The armored warriors dispersed. They broke into groups of about ten, and split into five different directions. They had obviously practiced this before. These miners must have a lot of free time. The unarmed believers made a run for the Mine # 16 tunnel. It was pretty far, but inside was safer than outside here once the battle started.

"Take care of these lawless maggots that anger our god," the master yelled angrily. "Realize the incredible power of Boralura!" cursed the master as he glared at the saucers in the sky.

One of the fighters set his sights on the master, and dove down at a very high speed.

The master noticed the flyer.

Eventually he poked a finger out from under his robe.

The fighter was right in front of him. From what I could see he had taken him.

The master pointed his finger at the fighter.

From the laser cannon blasted a bright beam.

The tip of the master's finger grew bright.

The match-up lasted less than a second.

The flyer went up in flames. The master stood there, calmly. The beam from the cannon which could tear a spaceship to pieces in seconds never reached him.

The flyer was blown back about three hundred meters into the sky as it exploded into a ball of flame.

This was no fight.

The master was too powerful.

However, in the meantime one of the mobile infantrymen had snuck up behind the master.

The hunched over mecha-infantry had quickly moved into the plaza at the moment the fighter and the master clashed.

The fact that I noticed it at all was complete luck.

The explosion had spread debris in all directions. Worried that he might get hit by a piece, I had looked over in Jeff's direction.

That's when I saw the mobile infantryman right next to him. His beam cannon was lined up with the master. His hand blaster was also extended and ready. The master, who had plucked the fighter out of the sky as if he had been shooting fish in a barrel, had left the defense of the temple to the armored guard, and they hadn't noticed the mobile infantry penetration (at least that's how it looked from here).

The mobile mecha-infantryman's finger squeezed down on the large scale blaster trigger.

The master spun around.

Just as the hand blaster fired.

The master lit up.

This time it wasn't just his finger. It was his whole body. It was the same as we'd seen in the tunnel. His robe and mask began to shine.

The mobile infantry was blown back. Thrown to the sky, the mecha-armor

was broken into a thousand pieces through the white light. The hand blaster and laser beam barrel rolled away from their target. The pulverized armor glowed a crimson red as it melted, and with no mercy or forgiveness the operator's body burned in the sky. The bright blast hit Jeff.

The frozen-stiff Jeff was thrown back from the energy blast of the bright light.

Suddenly he was wrapped up in this conflict. He couldn't move on his own, so he couldn't get away. He was still paralyzed.

He was slammed onto the stone plaza.

"Jeff!"

My heart was almost beating out of my chest.

"Worthless insect!" shouted the master.

His robes fluttered as he glided across the stone plaza.

He was headed straight for the entrance of the temple.

"I will crush you under my heel!" he spat out with fury and glided off.

3

"Jeff!"

My concern wasn't the master.

I was just worried about the handsome sheriff's condition.

"JEEEEEFF!"

I screamed as loud as I could to the fallen Jeff laid out on the stone plaza floor.

If something were to happen to him, I would be completely crushed (I am too embarrassed to say I would surely follow him to heaven, so I won't).

Did my impassioned cries reach their target? After screaming again and again Jeff finally responded.

First his arm moved.

Then his head. Slowly, so slowly it was starting to irk me, he raised his head up.

“!”

I swallowed my breath. His face was smeared with blood. It appeared either his temple or forehead was cut. A stream of blood flowed down his face between his eyebrows and split around his nose and dripped down off his chin. I could only barely see his eyes, but it was clear he was conscious.

He brought his hands together and pulled them, checking his strength.

He then used his arms to push himself up to a sitting position. He then slid his knees between his torso and the stone plaza. Pushing off the ground with his legs, Jeff stood up straight.

He staggered back and forth a bit. However, he was able to stay up. Spreading his arms out wide he regained his balance. It seemed he had completely broken the master’s spell.

He shook his head lightly, and then put pressure on his cut with his right hand. He was bleeding badly. Jeff tore the hem of his shirt off and wrapped it around his head.

He looked around at his surroundings. Since the master had disappeared, this area had grown relatively quiet. The battle had moved to where the Children of Heaven had assembled at the tunnel.

“Jeff!”

Until then he hadn’t noticed me stuck up here, and when he finally did see me, I couldn’t help but call his name again. Jeff answered by raising one hand in the air. He then picked up the hand blaster from the fallen mobile infantry, and riding atop his unstable legs he slowly made his way to where we were.

One step, then another step, he made his way.

At first, each step was like a major accomplishment, but he got better as he came closer. He had recovered well. Maybe any leftover rigor had finally melted away. By the end he jogged up to the crosses.

“Turn away,” said Jeff. He had found the control panel for the crosses and was aiming the barrel of the hand blaster at it.

He pushed the trigger button.

A fireball lit up the control panel, completely destroying it.

The crosses leaned back to the ground from the base and all the electromagnetic cuffs sprung open with a click.

Jeff pulled us upright.

“You all right?” I asked Jeff, my head overflowing with emotion.

“I’m sorry,” Yuri cut in. She reached for his hand and took the hand blaster. She then went to Mugi’s side. Wha! Could someone really be that cold? Here I was trying to set the mood and everything. I understood wanting to help Mugi out, but there was a time and a place for everything!

“How did you two get here?” Jeff turned and asked me as I sent a resentful sneer to Yuri.

I quickly switched to a bright and cheery look.

I summarized the sequence of events up to this moment.

“When I saw that crater, everything went black,” I said, my voice shaking. “I thought you had been swallowed up in that white light. What an escape!”

“I didn’t exactly escape. Before that I had already been captured,” said Jeff, shaking his head. “Hearing about the accident, we headed to Mine #4 by helicopter, where the master was waiting for us. There I was called a heretic, and was gassed. I don’t remember anything after that, so I didn’t know anything about a white light or a crater. Right after they got me, I saw the owner land in the VTOL. The master shot some light beam that hit somewhere on his plane, but somehow he barely escaped from crashing and made it over the rocky mountain.”

“Owner? Don’t you mean the mayor?” I asked. The VTOL with a damaged fuselage could only be the mayor’s Pegasus, right?

“The mayor wasn’t aboard,” answered Jeff, negating my question. “The only people at Mine #4 were the owner and his bodyguards.”

“Really…”

“Hey! It’s no good,” shouted Yuri, coming back toward us. “It isn’t strong enough. If we could somehow overload its circuits that might work, but this isn’t going to be enough. We need a more powerful energy source.”

“The beam cannon was still there. The power unit was still attached,” replied Jeff. He was still a bit hazy, but ready to rise to the occasion. That was our Jeff! Even in his state he was able to spot the important survival items on his way over to us. For a moment I was entranced, and just took in that handsome face.

“Kei!” Yuri shouted in a pointed tone.

Loudmouth. I was in my happy place.

“Up! Look! It’s coming down!” she screamed in a panic.

“What?”

That voice put me on edge.

I quickly looked up.

That’s when I noticed it. Our surroundings were darkened by its shadow.

I looked straight up.

Whoa!

A saucer.

Its altitude was only four or five hundred meters.

This single saucer was coming down onto the plaza.

4

The saucer touched down. Four long legs made up the landing gear, and it settled softly on the stone plaza. The ship sunk as the quiet shock absorbers cushioned the landing.

The ship was about twenty meters across. Not a particularly large size.

The round hatch in its center opened and a gangway came down.

A hatch on the ship's side also opened up. It was an oval-shaped door that opened from the bottom to the top. No stairs came out from this one.

At first, two mobile infantrymen appeared at the side door, and then jumped away using jet propulsion packs. One of the mecha-infantrymen carried a hand blaster, but the other one didn't have a blaster in hand, but did have what looked like a big box on his right shoulder. What was that? Some kind of new weapon?

The two mobile infantry fighters arced through the sky, and flew behind the three of us, who were facing the saucer.

Maneuvering their reverse jets with amazing skill, they landed, standing so very delicately, hardly stirring up the dust.

The muzzle of the hand blaster pointed straight at us. The shoulder-mounted-box-carrying infantryman had the laser beam cannon on his left shoulder readied and pointed at us as well. Whether they were pointing their weapons aggressively or defensively wasn't clear, but either way if felt creepy.

For a moment I turned away from the events at my back and turned my gaze to the gangplank that had descended from the single saucer.

It was right at that moment that from the rear of the hatch I could see a large figure emerge. Its shape was as wide as the hatch itself, and if it didn't come out right, it might get stuck. What was this giant being? At first I thought the gangplank was for the mobile infantry fighters.

But that wasn't right. It was for this living being.

The large body wrapped in a beige jumpsuit got stuck several times before making it through.

The gangplank bent under the weight.

Now the full body was revealed.

It was the owner.

The owner came walking to where we were.

As he walked his round beady eyes looked us over. His three chins wiggled to the rhythm of his steps.

I got it now. A member of Lucifer would have an ample supply of powered suits.

From the corner of the owner's meaty mouth came a slight chuckle.

He stopped and stood just in front of us.

"We've got most of the miners under control," he elated proudly, sticking out his chest. Even the special material of his jumpsuit looked like it was stretched as far as it could go. "We really turned the tables on them."

With a triumphant gleam in his eyes he looked at the mobile infantry. One had been destroyed by the master, but three mobile infantries together with eight highly maneuverable fighters overtook the five hundred Children of God. Their defense was up to fifty armored soldiers. If you thought about the difference in their fighting strength, it was easy to guess who would be victorious.

"I am amazed you were able to find us," Yuri said coolly. She still had the hand blaster, but carried it loosely.

"This camouflage was a real worry," said the owner as he looked up at the fog in the sky. "And on top of that, I take my eyes off here for a moment, and look what they put up."

The owner turned around and gestured toward the temple with his chin.

"You must be shorthanded in the human resources department. Your manager really dropped the ball on this one."

Yuri made this severe statement rather frankly.

"Yes, that's true," replied the owner, his shoulders drooping. "But the balance sheet always added up in the end."

"Huh? You mean Lucifer, right?" I slipped in, sensing good timing. I watched to see his reaction.

"Well, something, you see."

The disappointing answers returned. Even with his secret revealed, he remained completely calm.

“The owner and Lucifer? That’s not possible…”

Instead of stirring up the owner, we ended up getting a rise out of Jeff.

“No matter what organization I associate myself with, I work for one person. Me,” said the owner. “No one can stop me from doing whatever it is I want.”

“Whatever you want? What is it that you are trying to get?” I asked.

“The power the master has obtained,” he answered. “It’s clearly too dangerous in the hands of a normal person. Now, if I could get my hands on it, we could really put it to use.”

“So what are you planning for us, now that we know your secret?”

This time it was Yuri who asked the question.

“Are you going to execute us, gangland style?”

“Nothing of the sort!”

The owner shook his head in an exaggerated gesture. His neck was hidden under his chins, so if he didn’t overdo this movement the other person couldn’t catch its meaning.

“I have some work I am thinking I need some help with. Help from you. Very much alive.”

“Help?”

It wasn’t clear to Yuri or me what he was talking about.

“The master is in possession of a dangerous monster. I have gotten evidence of this from here and there. And according to my sources he pulled the strings on the Landis incident. That one was just practice.”

“You are talking about the invisible fangs,” I said.

“Right. And in the written report it also said this. The fangs don’t like Mugis. At least that’s what my limited information implies.”

“So, you want to borrow Mugi.”

“A Mugi is a dreadful beast that cannot fall to the inferior invisible fangs. Even if I wished to borrow it, he wouldn’t come without his owners.”

“You have been studying up, huh?” said Yuri.

“Thanks to you, I escaped from the master’s trap, and then followed the Absolute Children of God to their temple.”

The owner chuckled softly again.

“Mugi was trapped in an electric net,” said Yuri, pointing a finger at the curled up Mugi lying on the ground. “Can you help him?”

“Jeremy!”

Instead of answering Yuri, the owner waved his right hand lightly.

One of the mobile infantrymen carrying a hand blaster smoothly leapt into the air. Clearing at least twenty meters, he landed next to Mugi.

He adjusted the shoulder-mounted beam cannon and lined it up.

An energy beam thinner than a thread blasted out at Mugi.

The electric net crackled noisily. Sparks began to fly and it grew thicker.

To the naked eye, the energy beam didn’t look like much, but it was dozens of times more powerful than a hand blaster.

Electricity was arcing through the air prominently, higher and higher as the beam continued shooting. The threads of the net began to break, and then disappeared completely. We couldn’t see Mugi’s body at all.

The electricity radiated brightly and an orange orb glowed in the air.

The bright ball turned to flame.

It happened so abruptly. The flames blew out like an explosion and grew suddenly to a several-meter-wide fireball.

Even though we were over ten meters away, the heat blast toasted us.

The air was so hot, it was hard to breathe.

The flames split.

Split right in two. And at the same time, a black shadow emerged.

It was Mugi.

Mugi did one flip in the air, and without a sound landed on the stone plaza floor.

“Mgyaa!”

Crying out once, his entire body moved as if he was trying to shake something off his back.

He truly is an amazing creature. Even though his body was exposed to that much energy, he appeared to be uninjured and in good shape.

“Your wish has been granted,” said the owner, turning to us.

“Now do you think you can return the favor?”

5

“What is it that you want us to do?” asked Yuri.

“Where did the master go?”

“Inside that temple,” I answered.

“Then you lead the way into the temple.”

“Grrr,” Mugi growled. He didn’t take kindly to the owner’s arrogant attitude.

“Keep quiet, or your beautiful keepers will be burnt to charcoal,” the owner threatened Mugi. That was sure ballsy. But he got our description right, so it was forgivable.

“You coward! Using women as a shield, it’s downright indecent.”

Despite my kindness, Jeff gave the owner an earful. Jeff couldn’t help being sincere, even to a devil.

“It’s all right, Jeff,” I said calming the piping-hot sheriff. “We’ll go in first…”

I glared at the owner.

“We’d like to have a look at what the owner received.”

“And the mystery of the black egg, too,” Yuri attached to the end of my sentence.

We turned to the temple and began walking.

Mugi was in front.

This was just natural.

After Mugi was Jeff. He wasn’t about to allow us to go ahead of him. He took the hand blaster from Yuri and puffing up his chest went forward confidently.

We came after Jeff. We each had a ray gun given to us by the owner. The reason was that they couldn’t penetrate the special material of his jumpsuit. That’s how almost useless they were. But they were better than nothing. Behind us was the hand blaster-packing mobile infantryman. Finally was the mobile infantryman with the mysterious box mounted on his shoulder. The owner was sandwiched between the two mobile infantry, and faced the temple. We moved ahead with courage, but the owner was being a wimp.

“I bet the owner wishes he had his own powered suit,” Yuri whispered to me.

“But they don’t make them in his size,” I returned, giving a sideways glance at the hobbling and rotund owner. “He’d have to order it specially made.”

We both giggled quietly. Hearing nothing, the owner maintained his stern expression, and followed us to the temple. Seeing that made us giggle even harder.

We reached the temple gate as our laughs reached manic levels.

We had to pull ourselves together, as this was where things were going to get serious.

The entrance was made up of a series of stone pillars. There seemed to be some sort of pattern, but it didn’t make any sense to me. For starters, there were about ten round stone pillars lined up, and the entryway came after that and continued into the temple.

We cautiously walked down this pathway.

We used the shadows cast off the pillars as cover. After making sure there wasn’t an ambush waiting for us, we ran to the shadow of the next pillar.

The only ones walking down the center of the pathway with no fear were Mugi and the mobile infantry.

Without warning the pathway ended and we were in the center of the temple. Since there was no lighting, it suddenly got rather dark. Still, it was a bare space with no cover to hide behind. If this was going to be the case, we'd probably be better off strolling in boldly with the others and not trying to find something we couldn't see anyway.

We ran into a door.

It was a big door. It must have been five meters tall. And it was dose to eight meters wide. A joint ran through the center, and we either had to pull or push here to open it. Nothing happened when we stood in front of it, so there was nothing to indicate that it was an automatic door. It looked to be made of alloy. That's what I thought, at least. I really couldn't be sure.

"Grrrr…"

Mugi stared straight at the door.

We immediately slid our bodies to the wall. Mugi began probing around. I was worried that the door might suddenly open up. I sent the two mobile infantrymen to stand in front of the door, and as a precaution we prepared our weapons.

It was a good thing, too.

The door opened up toward us. As large as the door was, it moved smoothly and silently.

Yuri and I had our ray guns out.

Jeff was also on edge, but it was the owner whose heavy breathing was actually audible.

However.

Nothing happened.

No electric bolts flying through the air or walls of flame coming at us.

What a letdown. But in these circumstances nothing was better than

something.

Mugi casually walked through the doorway.

Jeff gulped, and then followed Mugi in.

That meant Yuri and I were next. Getting as low was possible, we rushed through the door.

Inside it was dim, and it wasn't immediately clear how large this big room was. One side seemed to be covered in some kind of thick, slow-moving fog or mist, and made the whole area appear very vague and ambiguous.

The owner came in flanked by the mobile infantry soldiers. Quite a grand entrance.

And at that moment.

The door shut closed.

There was no time to stop it. Even the mobile infantrymen didn't have a chance to jam a hand in the doorway. In a panic Jeremy was about to try to burn through the door using his beam cannon, but I rushed to stop him.

We could try that later. For now we just needed to figure out where we were and what was going on.

"Grrrr," Mugi growled again.

He was ahead of us his legs frozen in place. His body was low to the ground and he was staring straight ahead.

The fog began to clear. It appeared to brighten up.

The full structure of this wide space came into view.

There were human-like figures to the left and right.

They appeared to be attached to the floor.

I held the ray gun in front of me. The floor also appeared to be made of alloy. I felt an icy pang in my gut. The mobile infantrymen turned on their head lamps.

They illuminated the figures.

What the—

These were statues—part human part animal, they had mysterious limbs I couldn't quite grasp. Angels of Chakra. They measured about two meters in height, and their shape was very similar to the ten centimeter figure we'd seen at the mayor's mountain retreat. Naturally, it was the same as the one we'd seen in the clairvoyant vision. It wasn't made of stone, but of that unknown metal, I guessed. The situation being as it was, I wasn't going to worry about making sure.

All together there were about ten Angels of Chakra lined up. What I thought were people were all Angels of Chakra.

So what was Mugi growling and baring his fangs at?

I moved to where Mugi was positioned.

There was a clear break in the lingering mist.

He was looking into the darkness.

A dense, soggy fluid mass of darkness.

This dark mass, which reflected absolutely no light existed just before our eyes and filled the air.

Could it be that this was the side of the egg?

"Kei, the floor—" said Yuri as she pointed. I strained my eyes to see what she was talking about.

Someone was there!

In front of the dark mass someone was crouched down, turned with his back to us. The white robe he wore blended into the ashcolored floor, and that's why I hadn't noticed him sooner.

This was who Mugi was growling at.

But who was it?

The robe moved.

His body rose and he smoothly stood up.

He rotated around as if he was sliding.

Above the white robe rested a smooth silver mask.

As I'd expected, it was the master.

Mobile infantryman Jeffrey pushed past us and stood in front.

Ready to kill, he held his hand blaster at his chest.

"We have you cornered, master!"

The owner went to Jeremy's side.

His tone was ice cold.

"Now it's time to settle this."

6

"Have me cornered? What a funny thing to say. You must be so thrilled having the Gods of Destruction join your team."

The master laughed.

"Not another word!" the owner threatened. "Your 'children' have been kicked out. Now give up and give me the Boralura's secret. If you do what I say nicely I won't take your life, as well."

"Boralura!" I screamed. "You know about Boralura?"

"I know enough," said the owner. "It's a life-form from another dimension that made contact with this planet. It supposedly doesn't have a finite form, but normally it's like those…"

He gestured toward the Angels of Chakra with his chin.

"Shaped like some deformed elephant. The master, through some mental or physical contact, snatched the power."

"You didn't say anything about that before!" I protested.

"You didn't ask."

"How do you know all this?"

“Because Galbaldy stole that elephant and brought it to the mayor’s source. He wanted to make some sort of deal. He ended up being cheated with a smaller than expected sum of cash, and then Galbaldy lost his life to the master.”

“Galbaldy and the master were close?”

“He was the master’s biological father.”

Wha-wha—!!

Not prepared for that tidbit, I was knocked back about ten thousand light years.

“Owner, so from the very beginning you knew the Absolute Children of God were involved in this matter,” stated Yuri. “You knew, and that’s why you weren’t honest when we asked about Landis.”

“I don’t remember that conversation. Too far back,” he replied, turning away.

“By the greatness of Boralura!” the master suddenly spat out madly. “Only those chosen by Boralura can bond with his spirit. To the chosen are given infinite power.”

“And you are telling me that’s you?” asked the owner.

“Yes. And I will not only tell you…”

The master turned from us.

He raised up his left hand, pointing to the darkness.

The darkness changed. That area solidified and all color was instantly gone. There an image appeared.

In the center of the darkness a screen appeared.

The owner, Yuri, and I were all dumbfounded and speechless.

The image was of the rocky mountain. Near the bottom I could see the tunnel. It was Mine #16. The spot where all the Children of God had tried to escape to. The owner’s mobile infantry and flyers had made their attack there.

“Aah!”

The owner's face turned pale.

The screen showed a view above the ground. The screen was filled with the destroyed parts from powered suits and highly maneuverable flyers. And then the saucers.

Places on the powered suits and flyers had melted, and other parts were just pieces torn off. The wreckage was strewn all across the ground.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?"

The owner had believed without a doubt in the superiority of his military. Seeing this unexpected scene sent his body into jiggly spasms.

"It means this."

The camera angle moved from the surface of the ground up. With the grayish-white haze in the background, a single, undamaged fighter entered the frame. Having lost his fellow flyers, the pilot who still had his plane was awaiting further orders as he circled the battlefield.

The master lifted his right hand and squeezed it into a fist. Then his index finger shot out.

His finger lit up.

At the same moment an electric bolt struck the solo fighter on the view screen. It looked like he was hit by lightning. The persisttent bolts that split the sky struck the target until, after a few moments, the fighter was destroyed. The explosion sent fiery pieces of the plane in every direction.

The screen went blank.

"So now I have to ask, who has cornered whom?" asked the master, turning back to us. "Your military is destroyed. Just as I had hoped, this will all be settled here."

"You son of a…"

The owner spoke through grinding teeth.

The mobile infantryman aimed his hand blaster at the master.

The master's finger grew bright again.

A beam shot out.

The bright ray burned up the hand blaster.

The mobile infantryman threw down the burning weapon and bounded into the air. His movements were dizzying as he escaped.

“Of all the people on the planet, I am the sacred son Boralura chose. But there is an evil disciple chosen by the cursed beast among us,” said the master. “Show yourself, Yaksha!”

The master crossed his fingers, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

“Unh!”

Suddenly Jeff yelped in pain.

It truly came from out of nowhere.

Holding his head in his hands he fell to the floor, writhing.

“Jeff!”

Yuri and I were thrown in to such a panic that there was nothing we could do.

“Gauuuu!”

Mugi turned to the fallen Jeff and called out. His attitude shifted to hostility. I could see the fire in his eyes as he stared at Jeff.

Jeff turned and looked up. His arms and legs were in convulsions and were slapping against the floor. His mouth was open wide, and it looked like he was screaming from the bottom of his soul, but no sound emerged.

What had just happened to Jeff?

As suddenly as they began, Jeff’s spasms stopped. Turning away, with his mouth still wide open, he was frozen in place. He passed out. His pupils dilated, losing any focus.

“Gyaon!”

Mugi leapt into the air. He bounded toward the fallen Jeff.

I didn’t know what was going on.

Mugi jumped straight at Jeff. This was bad. I had no way to stop him.

“No!” I screamed with all my might.

Mugi’s claws barely avoided slicing through Jeff’s face.

But his face was untouched.

Mugi’s body landed on the other side of Jeff’s. I thought that Mugi had intended to kill Jeff. But Jeff was not the target.

Sparks flew.

Mugi had locked jaws with something that wasn’t visible to us.

Whatever it was had settled right above Jeff’s body. This was where Mugi had begun his attack on an invisible enemy.

Wha—? What?

Jeff vomited the invisible fangs?

With an ear-piercing blast, one of the Angels of Chakra collapsed. There was no doubt that we would find those distinctive tooth marks in the rubble.

This was impossible. A lie. Impossible! Unthinkable!

The invisible fangs came out of Jeff?!

How could that be?

7

It was no lie.

Yaksha, the beast from another dimension, used Jeff as an intermediary to come to this world. The master received power from Boralura, but, at the same time Jeff received power from Yaksha. Both of them could make contact with life-forms in different dimensions, the problem was the latent psychic ability of the host that they chose. Boralura’s power seemed to match with the master well, and Yaksha lined up with Jeff.

The difference between Boralura and Yaksha was that Yaksha wasn’t as powerful, and was evil. That wasn’t true of Jeff’s real nature.

But Jeff wasn't actually Yaksha.

Stupid. Why didn't Boralura go to Jeff and Yaksha go to the master. It would have been so much simpler in that case. It all would have played out more peacefully. Wicked Yaksha didn't reach Boralura's level of power. It was a good way to pull the strings. If Boralura had come to Jeff it would have been the perfect encounter of mankind and a higher being from another dimension.

Because the opposite happened we had this disastrous situation.

Numbskull. Boralura was an idiot.

That's right. I was cursing Boralura's name.

I knew it wouldn't do any good, but it was all I could do.

And then—

A violent battle between Mugi and Yaksha began to unfold in the open area. Most of the Angels of Chakra were smashed in the fighting. They were supposed to be made of that super strong metal, but they broke into tiny pieces pretty easily. These must have been replicas the master made for some kind of ritual or ceremony.

The walls and pillars of the large room suffered heavy damage as well. Yaksha chomped through anything he could get a hold of, and since Mugi couldn't see him, Mugi was swinging blindly with his front claws. At the level these two beasts were rampaging, the walls, pillars, and everything else in this room would likely be unrecognizable by the time it was done.

The owner and the two mobile infantrymen didn't know what to do.

It was because they couldn't see what they wanted to shoot. Also if they missed and hit Mugi, who was wrapped battle, he would likely come back to tear apart the powered suits to defend himself.

However, this was a dangerous and volatile situation, so they couldn't just give up.

Their chance arrived. The master was in full concentration controlling Yaksha.

Which meant…

He should be defenseless.

Seeing the opportunity, the owner commanded Jeremy.

Jeremy jumped. He has lost his hand blaster, so he prepared the beam cannon on his left shoulder. Swooping down from above, he fired the beam cannon aimed at the master as he drew closer to his target. The beam burned through the master.

Or that's what I thought.

The master's body radiated light. The beam then reflected back. The reflected beam came back more powerful than before, and the thicker ray returned to the barrel of the beam cannon.

The beam cannon exploded.

The shock blew Jeremy sideways.

He flew in a straight line toward the dark wall.

He hit the darkness.

There wasn't actually a wall there. It had a clear beginning, but the wall was really just darkness. It was neither liquid nor solid. But, it did have a wet, soggy sense to it that looked very dense.

That was the darkness that Jeremy flew into.

The powered suit was squashed. The armor was destroyed and the generator took a brutal hit.

Explosion.

Jeremy's body was in flames as he fell to the ground.

The master's eyes flew open.

"Only those chosen may enter Boralura's darkness," the master mumbled.

He then gave a pointed look at the owner.

The owner's legs shook.

Yaksha was coming.

Mugi switched directions and drew near the owner.

A high-pitched sound pierced the air.

It was an alarm to drive something away.

The something looked to be the owner's body.

The jumpsuit torn to pieces. Pieces of skin and flesh.

Fluttering in the air.

The owner was being bitten and torn apart by Yaksha.

Instant death. That's what Yuri and I assumed. Blood-smeared chunks of meat spattered the floor. There was no way we could help. No one could survive that attack. We were seeing the slaughter live and up close.

But.

What was left of the owner rolling on the floor, slowly began to rise up. The flesh had been peeled off of him. His face, chest, and abdomen were covered in cuts.

But there wasn't a drop of blood flowing from them.

What was torn from the owner's body wasn't his flesh.

This person standing there threw off the remaining scraps of "skin" from his body.

His name had changed.

This was not Telestofarnus.

This was Bonassis.

The owner and the mayor were one and the same.



Wearing an artificial skin as a disguise, the skinny mayor played the role of the giant owner. That's right. They were about the same height. The only real difference was the width and depth of their bodies. The difference in the voices was probably done electronically.

I suddenly remembered how Jeff said he escaped the trap in the VTOL thanks to the owner. So there wasn't a mix-up there. We were both correct. After escaping from Mine #4 he'd switched back into the mayor inside the plane.

The truth of this case was finally starting to surface.

The mayor, one of the secret leaders of Lucifer, worked out a deal for the sake of a Buddhist organization, and came to Chakra not only as the mayor, but also as the owner.

For political needs he was the mayor, and for business needs he was the owner. He skillfully spread himself between these two roles to rule the planet of Chakra.

But an unexpected situation arose. One of the miners was contacted by an alien life-form from another dimension and was given an incredible power. The mayor's secret would be exposed. So he had to handle that nuisance while unraveling the mystery of these beings from another dimension, but to ensure that the master wouldn't discover your secret, you had to move with extreme discretion. Inevitably, something had to be done about the master. You were resigned to that fact. By taking out the master, the mayor had a chance to get a handle on the situation.

And then the Landis incident had occurred. Having tied the master to the incident, he then called in the help of the WWWA.

It was a bit of a gamble. If the case was accepted, then a WWWA Trouble Consultant would be dispatched. The aim was for the TC to get here and mix it up with the master. And by the remote chance that the case wasn't solved, there was no evidence that the mayor was working against the master.

On the other hand, the master being the master, he'd caught wind that the mayor was the one who'd made a case to the WWWA. He then sent assassins to the WWWA Headquarters in an effort to block the investigation before it

even started. Those armored “shadows” were local miners, but they didn’t succeed in their mission. It seemed that the master had at least three believers on the mayor’s security staff. Point by point, information about the mayor could have been leaked in such a manner that it was as deadly as an assassin.

Dammit!

Figuring all this out caused my blood to run the other direction.

My temperature rose to a boil and I could sense my anger fuming inside.

Thanks to your little conspiracy, all of our glory just crashed and burned (and don’t even try to convince me otherwise).

Unforgivable.

I’d like to line you all up and slap you one-by-one.

8

“Chk!”

Seeing us seeing him in his true form, the mayor clicked his tongue.

Extending a finger, he gave a signal to the one remaining mobile infantryman.

He detached the box he had been carrying on his shoulder.

With no distinct markings, it looked like an average, everyday box.

The mayor sped to the front of the box. He pressed a button on the side. One side of the box lifted open like a door. At the same time, the parts folded up inside opened up at different places on the box, springing out all over the place.

The mayor crawled into the box.

The door closed.

The box was really a body. The parts that had emerged formed arms, legs, and a head.

I had never seen anything like this before.

A compacted powered suit.

That made sense. The owner's body wouldn't fit into any normal powered suit, but as the mayor he could.

He began to move.

He picked up the hand blaster that had fallen next to Jeff. Jeff had tossed it away when he was writhing in agony. The mayor must have noticed that. It was his in the first place, so there wasn't anything we could say.

The open area became as still as death. At a surprising moment, considering the circumstances, all movement and talking ceased at the same time.

Of course, this included Yuri and me, as well as the mayor and master, and also Mugi and Yaksha. All perfectly still.

Bound together by this weird coincidence, I held my breath for a moment.

A strange air pocket in the midst of battle.

The mayor immediately took advantage. He wasn't only armed with a beam cannon and a hand blaster. He was also equipped with mini missiles, hyper-grenades, and other weapons of mass destruction. This extreme hardware could be expected of the mayor's suit, and the mobile infantryman who carried it all this time was also specially equipped.

The mayor went all in on this coincidental moment in time.

Firing everything at once, he was trying to destroy the temple and everything in it, including the master and us.

It would take more than a little luck for us to exit this situation victorious, much less alive. We were usually able to push fate a bit to help us through. And if our luck never arrived, we would have to take on the master without any weapons.

Suddenly both powered suits were surrounded by bright red flames.

At first I thought this was a suicide attack, but that wasn't the case.

The missiles fired in a constant stream and the hyper-grenades shot out in every direction. With no aiming or target, they shot off every weapon they had,

including their beam cannons, laser rifles, and hand blasters.

The dim open space lit up with bright beams flying all over the place.

It looked a lot like the master when he lit himself up.

The missiles and hyper-grenades exploded randomly around the wide-open space.

There was a break in the emptiness.

Yaksha moved, and when the master turned his body, Mugi took off running.

And then there was us.

And then there was us with nothing we could do.

The floor in front of us rumbled up with a tremendous roar.

Yuri and I grabbed each other's hands for support.

And all we had were these toy ray guns for defense. We both struck pissed-off poses, as that would do about as much good as anything else.

Mugi rushed to us.

He covered us with his body.

The blasts and falling scrap and embers continued on.

Mugi protected us from the raining debris.

This was no single tiny explosion.

A series of explosions went off here and there. Some blasted into each other, creating small tornados.

Even Mugi couldn't withstand the battering.

"Kyaa!"

Mugi, Yuri, and I were pulled together into the air. Wrenched from our place, our bodies floated through the air. Dangling like a trio of rag dolls, we were thrown to the rear of the temple.

In other words, toward the darkness.

The darkness that only those chosen by Boralura could enter.

If we couldn’t enter we would be slammed against the darkness and flattened.

No! Somebody help!

I wanted to scream, but even if I could, the words wouldn’t come out in time.

The darkness grew closer.

The fact I wasn’t alone was a little reassurance. To reduce the small chance that Yuri alone would get away, I gripped her hand even tighter.

The darkness was right in front of us.

We slammed into it.

Swoosh.

And went through.

Huh? There wasn’t really time to wonder.

We began to fall down head over heels.

Into the ebony darkness.

There was nothing above or below, or anywhere in between, but there was little question about the sensation of falling.

“Hyaa!”

Yuri and I both screamed together.

The darkness didn’t have a bottom. Falling in a place that didn’t have a bottom meant that we would be falling forever.

Don’t even joke about something like that.

I don’t care how or where, but make it stop.

That was the only wish I made.

And that’s when.

My wish came true.

It was that sudden.

In the middle of the black, we immediately stopped.

But it wasn't as if we had landed on the ground somewhere. It was as if we were suddenly weightless. We weren't falling, and at the same time we weren't rising, either. We were simply floating. Naturally, the "we" included Yuri and Mugi. I knew this because I was still holding on to Yuri's hand and I could feel Mugi's tail wrapped around my leg.

What was really strange was that even though we were surrounded in darkness, I could clearly see Yuri and Mugi. It wasn't as if we were glowing or anything, so why was it we could see each other?

It's because you aren't seeing their bodies. You are seeing their spirits. Someone gently told me the answer.

Someone?

Who?

I quickly looked all around. But besides Mugi and Yuri, no one else was around. The darkness around us seemed to spread even farther, though.

We are Boralura.

Again, I could hear a voice resonate.

And they say they are Boralura!

Wasn't expecting that!

You have nothing to fear.

Boralura spoke again.

You have made contact with Boralura. You have entered the field, and your physical bodies have been set in the contact area.

"When you say 'field,' do you mean the black egg?" I asked.

Yes.

"Then that means we are in the egg right now?"

This is such an ambiguous state, but in simple terms you are not mistaken.

"Then why don't you just say she is right?" asked Yuri sourly. Birdbrain! Back off! There's no need to throw in unnecessary comments. What are you going to

do if Boralura decides to get angry?

We do not get angry.

Boralura spoke again. Hoo boy. Everything I was thinking was heard. Everything.

“You are the different life-form from another dimension that contacted the master, right?” asked Yuri

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That is another ambiguous situation, but we will respond in the affirmative.

“Which part is ambiguous?” I asked.

Saying different life form from another dimension. The basic concept is correct.

Suddenly a huge amount of information came streaming into our brains. It was impossible to grasp the complexity of what I was seeing. My brain cells felt like they were all about to pop.

“Sto-stop!”

I finally mustered the energy to speak.

“That’s enough. Let’s just speak in vague terms.”

A hand raised in the air.

“Why does Boralura support the master?” asked Yuri, after taking a deep breath.

He is the only contact we have had with mankind.

“I think you made a poor choice in choosing him,” I said. “Now this world is in complete chaos because of it.”

We have no malicious intent. The negative results in this case are due to human mentality.

“I can see that,” I said nodding my head. Boralura was measuring cultures on relative terms. From the master’s perspective, he was contacted by an absolute god.

We are seeking friendly relations with mankind. Borlura continued.

For that reason we prepared the field, in order to foster the opportunity.

“But you set limitations on who is allowed to make contact.”

Are you saying we have acted in error?

“Well, there is room for improvement, if you can find a way.”

The field can only exist right here. Ishana is needed to establish the field. In your concept of space, Ishana only exists here. And even still, it is an extremely minuscule amount.

“Ishana? What’s that?”

It is a very rare element. Mankind has not yet discovered it.

No doubt about that. If this was the only spot in our entire universe where it exists, then of course no one knew about it.

If a new contact is appropriate here, then we would ask to start over from the beginning. Doing so we can find harmony with humanity and start a wonderful new era together.

That does sound pretty terrific.

Infinite possibilities are hidden within humanity’s abilities. With our help, mankind can jump beyond the limited state of today, and bloom into something new and great.

“That sounds like the way to go,” I said, nodding my head.

I mean, this was the Boralura who passed to the master his amazing powers. Put to good use, this could mean a bright future for the human race.

This will be the first and last interaction at this place of Ishana between humans and Boralura. Once this field eventually disappears, we will likely be unable to visit this place again.

“Got it. It all makes sense on this end,” I said. “And are you going to let us get

us back to the temple before that happens?”

Of course.

“Can you lead the way?”

Let your consciousness go, Boralura stated softly.

The connection will be severed.

And it was just as Boralura said.

I closed my eyes and relaxed my consciousness. It wasn’t difficult at all. This was one of the skills we practiced when honing our psychic abilities when training at the WWWA. This was probably also the reason we were able to make contact with Boralura so easily. Together as one, the two of us are espers. The master said he was chosen. I got the feeling that the chosen ones were probably all espers.

The darkness began to flow back. This time there was not a sense of falling, but of floating.

We continued to float, being sucked up to higher and higher altitudes.

That’s what if felt like, anyway.

Our speed increased.

And then a sense of deceleration.

There was a light shock.

We coiled through the muggy skin of the darkness.

I opened my eyes.

We were back in our world.

I was still holding Yuri’s hand.

I was in a daze for several moments.

There was nothing left of the temple.

It was in complete ruins.

Turning around, the gigantic black egg looked as if it had been shelled. In front

of it was broken pillars and crushed walls along with other wreckage. If you had never seen the temple, you probably wouldn't be able to tell what the building was just by looking at the wreckage. The only thing that wasn't crushed or crumbled was one single Angel of Chakra. But there had been ten of these earlier. Well, even just one still standing was a miracle.

Right near the undamaged Angel of Chakra lay Jeff. The handsome sheriff was still frozen. Yaksha hadn't returned then. I wanted him to open his eyes soon. He wasn't at full hunk mode in this state.

Just a little ways away, something caught my attention on the stone plaza. It was the saucer the mayor had flown in on. Yuri and I went to check it out. Two of the four landing gear legs were broken and bent. Other than that, the damage was minor. My guess was that it could fly.

"I wonder if the mayor won his bet," said Yuri, out of the blue, as she examined the saucer.

"I don't see him anywhere," I responded, shading my eyes with one hand and looking across the horizon.

"He got away. He wasn't going to try to continue all on his own. It would be impossible."

"Grrrr," grumbled Mugi.

Mugi looked to his side. He was glaring at Mine #16, where the Children of God had flocked to. A fierce battle appeared to have taken place. It looked like either the Children of God had been completely annihilated, or whoever was left had run for the hills.

I went over to Mugi's side.

Mugi was still growling.

The rumble in his throat grew louder. His feelers began to whip around, and the matted whiskers that looked like ears twisted around delicately.

It couldn't be.

I tried to follow Mugi's eyes.

Then, at the next moment.

Mine #16 collapsed.

At first the mountain that housed the tunnel grew in size, and then it fell in on itself.

The implosion sounded like a bomb going off, and the sound echoed throughout.

There must have been a gigantic explosion inside the mountain.

As rock and sand filled the tunnel, the mountain flattened out.

The air filled with dust.

Something spewed out.

At first I thought it was another smaller explosion, but that wasn't it. Chunks of rock and dirt clods erupted into the air, and in the center of the geyser was something silver and shiny. The luminous point had distinct features.

It was coming our direction at a frightening speed.

It wasn't flying.

It had jumped.

Which could only mean—this was a powered suit.

"Gyaon!" Mugi cried.

Again, instead of running, we stood ready to fight.

The powered suit landed a little ways from where we stood. Could it be the mayor, or another one of the mobile infantry? We couldn't tell, yet.

He would be able to reach us in one more bound.

He jumped again.

That's where it got him.

The powered suit was suddenly pulled at a right angle.

His left leg was being chewed up.

It was the invisible jaws, Yaksha.

"Gyaon!"

Mugi took off.

He leapt toward Yaksha in an effort to restart the fight they'd never gotten to finish.

The mangled powered suit began to descend.

He had completely lost his balance. He was really crashing more than descending.

The powered suit landed at the edge of the plaza.

The hatch opened up. The person inside revealed his face.

It was the mayor.

His face was pale. It had taken an ashen color. The left leg of the powered suit had been bitten off. I could only see his upper body at the moment, but I was expecting to see that the mayor's leg was severely injured, as well. He'd likely lost a lot of blood.

It was a safe bet.

The mayor looked at us like he was trying to say something. His lips were moving, but no sound came out.

"Kei!" Yuri screamed. She pointed her left hand up into the sky.

I turned my head to look.

Armored warrior. A single soldier with a hand jet attached to his back descended from the sky and drew closer to where we stood.

"That's the master!" said Yuri. "He switched his mask to a helmet."

The master, now outfitted in armor, slowly descended on the open area.

He landed right between us and the mayor.

He glanced at us, and then turned towards the mayor.

He pointed a finger at the mayor.

Bright light.

A bright beam blasted the mayor in the chest.

The powered suit began to burn, as well.

The suit erupted in flames.

The dark red flames scorched the ground.

“You two lived, I see.”

His mask sparkling white, the master turned to face us.

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We stood face-to-face with the master in the stone plaza.

No one else was around. Jeff was laid-out and unconscious. The deadly battle between Mugi and Yaksha had spread to the rocky mountain.

So that just left the three of us.

“So you waited until the end to show up,” said the master. “Is there something you’d like to say to me?”

“Nope, not especially,” I replied. “But it sounds like you have something to bark about.”

“Look at you,” laughed the master. “Even without a decent weapon, you still talk like you can actually hurt me.”

“You don’t think we can, do you?” asked Yuri.

“If you think you are the only almighty here, you have made a huge mistake.”

“Wha-what?”

“How do you like this?”

Yuri and I joined hands. Then I stuck out my left hand as Yuri stuck out her right. We brought our hands around and both pointed our index fingers at the master.

Two white beams shot out from the tips of our fingers.

“Uwaa!”

The master's chest plate burned as he was thrown backward.

The strap holding the hand jet burned through. This important piece of equipment slid off the master's back.

Lucky for him, the cut was superficial. However, the psychological damage was more than a little deep.

"You-you evil…"

His voice was shaking.

"We told you. We said there is more than one almighty," I said smugly.

"You-you were chosen? Chosen by Boralura…"

"This power is nice and all, but it kinda stinks that it only works when you are near the egg," said Yuri. "You were just trying to compromise the mayor, right? If you could use the power anywhere there would be no need to share the rule of Chakra with him."

"And yet, you had your sights set on world domination. I can tell by your personality," I picked up where Yuri left off to sum it up.

"…"

The master had nothing to say in response. His entire body vibrated in anger as he stood in place.

"You used Yaksha because you couldn't act on your own, right?" I added. "You waited for it to grow up, then used it as a hitman. And you had it using Jeff's amazing body for transport, so you could make it appear and disappear as you pleased."

"…"

"Master, you are a piece of human trash."

"Rrrrr," he growled.

"If you leave this place, you go back to being just a normal person. If you will let us, we'll arrest you quietly and with no pain."

"Shut up!" the master screamed. "Do you think this is over? Are you truly that insane?"

“Are you resisting arrest?”

Our fingers were still pointed at the master.

“Me? I still haven’t played my trump card,” said the master. “So here comes the time to show it.”

As he spoke he broke into a run.

We blasted another pair of beams.

One hit his shoulder and the other his back.

But he didn’t seem to be affected. He had put a barrier around his body to counter the beams.

And he was fast. He was moving at an amazing speed. Using his energy like rocket fuel, he streaked across the plaza.

He reached the Angel of Chakra.

Spinning on one heel, he scooped up the elephant figure onto his back. The Angel of Chakra radiated a pale blue glow. It was a faint, phosphorescent light. The glow spread to include the master.

We shot our finger beams at the master again. Hidden within the bright glow, the master became one with the figure.

“Gods of Destruction!”

I could hear the master’s voice.

“You two were on good terms with the empty-headed sheriff, I believe.”

What was this freak getting at?

“So what would you say if I did this?”

This? What is this?! I was about to ask. I never got a chance.

It was because Mugi and Yaksha returned to the plaza.

More accurately, Yaksha was coming this way, and Mugi was chasing after it.

I felt a tremendous pressure blow over my body.

Mugi zipped like a black shadow, and followed it.

The path of Yaksha.

Toward Jeff.

So it was going to escape by entering Jeff again.

Then Jeff would return to normal, and wake up, right?

What was the this the master was blabbering about?

And that is when.

My prediction was a little optimistic.

The master was in complete control of the full-grown Yaksha.

I had forgotten about the strong power the egg gave off in this place.

If only we had prepared for this situation.

The Yaksha materialized.

The dimension beast Yaksha entered Jeff's body. At the same time, Jeff's body mutated. He immediately swelled up. His clothes were ripping, and soon he would be naked.

Naked Jeff!

But he wouldn't be shaped like a human. It would be just a giant meat blob. I wasn't sure how big he would get, or how far he could stretch.

Suddenly he expanded to over ten meters.

His body shifted to a shiny slimy pink flush. His arms and legs disappeared, and where the head ended and the body began wasn't very clear. Enormously big and round, it had mutated into a very unattractive creature. On its pink skin were black speckles scattered about, which made the creature even uglier.

But this wasn't the first time I had seen this beast. Where was it before?

Oh yeah.

In the clairvoyant vision.

When we were hanging off the crosses we'd had a vision, and that's when this creature had appeared to us before.

So the vision was of Yaksha's true form.

Now, before our eyes, the rolling Yaksha's mouth opened wide.

Half of Yaksha's body opened up.

It revealed the fangs that had left those unique bite marks.

It was repulsive. I couldn't remember seeing something so repugnant. But this ugly beast was our handsome Jeff.

"Kei!" Yuri screamed. "Get your finger ready. We can take this down. This monster."

Take it down? That meant taking down Jeff.

"It isn't Jeff," said Yuri. "That thing is Yaksha!"

Well, but, I know, but…

Prodded by Yuri, I pointed my index finger at Yaksha. With drool splattering around, Yaksha bared its teeth and dashed toward us. Its body was large and misshapen, but it still moved as fast and nimbly as it had when it was invisible.

"Pull it together! Now!" shouted Yuri, as she looked at me. I had no other choice.

The revolting Yaksha.

But overlapping it was Jeff's smiling face.

"No!"

I pointed my finger away.

"I can't! I can't shoot Jeff!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs.

11

Dammit. I couldn't stand it. I'd fallen for the master's trick. Even knowing it was a trick, I still couldn't go through with it.

“Chk!”

Yuri clicked her tongue in disgust. Yaksha was right in front of us and getting closer. If we didn’t do something Yaksha would swallow us whole.

Mugi jumped.

Mugi had stopped chasing Yaksha once it entered Jeff. Mugi knew my feelings toward Jeff.

But the situation had changed. Not a time for niceties now. If Yaksha wasn’t stopped we would be eaten.

Mugi landed on Yaksha’s chin. Now that Yaksha had a physical body, fighting the monster would be easier for Mugi.

Yuri pulled my arm. “Kei, come on!”

As Mugi tried to stop Yaksha, she tried to put some distance between us and them.

Yuri pulled me toward the saucer. We went up the bent gangway, thorough the hatch, and into the cockpit.

Yuri grabbed a hold of the control lever. Setting off explosive bolts, she separated us from the landing gear and gangway, and closed the hatch.

The saucer moved up into the air. We ascended vertically about 30 meters before circling around. On the main screen appeared Yaksha grappling with Mugi.

Mugi was giving a good fight. Even in its materialized state, Yaksha was absurdly strong. Mugi’s teeth and claws slipped on Yaksha’s slimy skin, and the giant creature looked as if it could crush Mugi to death.

“Just wait, Mugi!”

Yuri turned the saucer.

The saucer’s weapon was a large-scale laser cannon. That was it. Setting the laser cannon to full power, Yuri flew toward Yaksha.

Yuri aimed for its big, wide-open mouth.

A miss. The cannon fire wouldn’t hit Yaksha. This must be the trump card the

master mentioned.

To test the theory, Yuri set the cannon's sights on the master, who had attached himself to the Angel of Chakra. Yuri fired the cannon, and again, the blasts were nowhere near on target.

Again, we had no fist to punch with.

"Gyan!"

Mugi was hit. Our strong-as-steel Mugi took a bite in the back, and screeched in pain.

To escape an inevitably painful death, Mugi jumped. Mugi landed on the body of the saucer. In fact, right on top of the cockpit. Using the camera to check his condition, we saw from the way his back was bent that he was hurt badly.

Seeing Mugi in this shape, I felt a stirring deep in my gut. A demon of my own was ready to be released.

"Change seats," I said, pushing Yuri out of the way.

Taking over the pilot's seat, I grabbed a hold of the control lever.

"What are you going to do?" asked Yuri.

"We have seen that thing before," I answered gruffly.

I brought the saucer down. I hovered the saucer between the Angel of Chakra and Yaksha.

I turned on the outside speaker.

"Brink it on, freak," I said as the ship faced Yaksha. "I'll give you a fight. If you want to take a bite of something, take a bite of this. This is it. Your final chance. Or are you not up to it?"

I was pushing Yaksha's buttons, and pushing them hard.

For the moment it was just Yaksha staring down the saucer and vice versa.

"What's the matter? You afraid of me?!"

I rained down a shower of laser cannon fire.

Yaksha moved.

And it moved fast.

It came straight at us. And what speed. In one breath it would close the distance between us.

“Hold on tight, Mugi!” I yelled into the mic.

The Yaksha came.

Its giant mouth was wide open and its teeth shined a wet reflection. Streams of drool ran out of its mouth.

Closer and closer.

Only a few meters left.

I punched the jets to maximum and slammed the throttle.

Painful G-forces.

It felt like my head was being beat with a nightstick.

The saucer went straight up into the air.

Yaksha missed us by only centimeters.

But Yaksha did continue at that speed into the Angel of Chakra.

I didn’t slow down.

The saucer continued its rise through the atmosphere.

There was an explosion.

It was below the saucer. This was what happened when Yaksha and the Angel of Chakra came into contact. I don’t know why it happened, but I did know that it would happen.

I mean, that’s what we’d seen in our clairvoyant vision.

A white blast exploded out. It looked a lot like the flash we’d seen from Mine #1.

The blast swelled out in a round mass.

In order to avoid getting hit by the blast, I maintained our fullspeed upward progression. The main screen went crazy. The blast was too strong. Too bright.

From the window we could see the bright flash, but even that was so bright we had to look away.

It was so bright that tears actually started to stream down my face.

I didn't want Yuri to see me crying, so I slyly wiped them away.

But the tears didn't stop flowing.

High in the sky, we waited for the flash to fade away.

As quickly as it rose up, the flash disappeared.

Even though the white light had faded, we waited a few moments before examining the situation on the ground.

The mist covering the area slowly began to dissipate.

Other than that, nothing had changed. At least from this angle, it looked safe down there.

We began our descent.

The planet's surface had turned into an amazingly large crater.

The crater was a slick tan color, and smooth like a polished stone, reflecting a bright sheen. I estimated its diameter at over ten kilometers. The edge of the crater actually overlapped with the crater at Mine #4.

Other than that, the crater was empty. No temple. No Angel of Chakra. Also, no more black egg.

"Ishana certainly was a rare element, like they said," mumbled Yuri as she looked out at the crater.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod. I had a bad feeling. Something wasn't right.

"Wasn't the Angel of Chakra the symbol of Boralura?"

"Yeah."

"And Ishana was contained inside that Elephant Angel…"

"I see what you are getting at."

"When the Ishana is gone, the egg disappears."

“Yeah.”

“And if the Ishana is gone, then contact can’t happen again. I think that’s what I heard?”

“Me too.”

“Hmmm”

Yuri hummed quietly.

I did too.

And then it happened. Another blast of pressure came.

The landscape shook.

For a moment I thought our engines were acting up. Unfortunately, it was more complicated than that.

It was an earthquake.

After Mine #4 was turned to a crater there was an earthquake, too. The relatively fragile crust of Chakra couldn’t withstand such sudden blasts of energy, and the response was a seismic shift.

If the last earthquake could be called massive, then this earthquake was massively massive.

It went on for about ten minutes, and the tremors were violent. Watching from the sky, we could see mountains crumble and the earth tear open and swallow up entire hills. The smooth and shiny crater was now full of cracks and debris.

“Say, Kei,” Yuri said in a disturbingly composed tone of voice. “With this earthquake and everything, what happened to Aslaville?”

“What happened? Just…”

I couldn’t finish my sentence.

The answer was pretty clear by looking out the window.

epilogue

We headed back to Aslaville in the saucer.

Looking down at the destroyed highway below us gave a preview of Aslaville's fate.

From inside the cockpit, Yuri began to speak.

"Once we get back to *Lovely Angel*, we better let the chief know what happened."

It wasn't much different than turning ourselves in for a heinous crime.

"There are three things we need to tell him," said Yuri.

"What things?"

I didn't really want to hear the answer, but I asked anyway.

"Number one is that the case is solved."

Yuri stuck one finger in the air.

That was a good place to start.

"Number two is that we permanently severed ties with life from another dimension."

That one probably wouldn't go over so well.

"And number three is that there was a huge earthquake and that Chakra was completely devastated."

Yup, the really bad news.

I felt a heaviness in my chest.

I looked down on Aslaville from above.

From the outskirts to the city center, every building had collapsed. Downtown

was a sea of flames.

We gave up landing in the city. Even if we wanted to, there was no more heliport.

We decided to go straight to *Lovely Angel*.

The saucer arrived at the space port.

There we heard some even worse news.

The space port was out of commission.

Every landing strip was damaged. Not a single one wasn't torn up by the quake. Fires had broken out here and there as well.

Lovely Angel wasn't anywhere near the burning flames, but was damaged in a landing pad cave-in, and leaned to one side.

We were told it would take about two months before she would be in the air again. It was because this was a remote mining planet. They had neither the parts nor any experts in disaster recovery. In addition to that, the mayor and the owner were dead (well, it was the same person…), so there was no one to make any decisions.

We checked the communications system on the lurching *Lovely Angel*.

I wasn't sure if I should be happy or disappointed to discover that it was operational.

We then contacted headquarters.

Department Chief Soranaka's face appeared on the com screen.

He wore his usual stern expression.

"It appears to be communications on the Chakra case. Am I right?"

The chief spoke without a smile.

"Uh, yes… We did solve the case."

I stuttered through the three points we had discussed. At number two his face began to change color and at number three his hair began to stand on end.

"Reports on the Great Chakra Earthquake have already been coming in," said

the chief. “Casualty estimates are at 11,000 dead. Two-thirds of the entire population. Damage estimates are at 45 trillion credits. The planet is in such a state of destruction that reconstruction is impossible…”

“Oh, really?”

He did say 45 trillion. My brain couldn’t wrap itself around the magnitude of a number that big.

“Umm…,” said Yuri from my side.

“Yes? Is there another disaster you’d like to confess to?”

How cold a response could the chief give?

“No. I needed to tell you that *Lovely Angel* can’t get off the ground,” said Yuri. “I was wondering if you could send a ship to pick us up, or else we are going to be stuck here for two months.”

“Confined there? For two months?!”

I might have been reading too much into it, but did he look happy at the idea?

“Got it. Just leave everything to me,” he replied in an almost giddy voice. “You two must have a bunch of vacation days saved up. Here’s a perfect opportunity for an extra-special vacation package, courtesy of your department chief.”

I had never heard the chief sounding so invigorated.

“Vacation? Chief, there is nothing to do here. All there is here are toppled mountains and mortuaries!” Yuri prattled desperately.

“Look how nice I am! Giving you a vacation this long is unheard of.”

The chief nodded at himself enthusiastically.

“Chief!” Yuri and I screamed in unison, grabbing on to the com screen. This would be a vacation worse than death itself.

“Well then, see you in two months—”

The chief raised his hand, and then the screen went blank.

“CHIEF!!”

The screen was black.

Yuri and I looked at each other as we sunk into our seats.

“Mgyao,” Mugi meowed.

The three of us spent the next two months in the ruins of planet Chakra.

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For more Dirty Pair, this person seems to be working on some fan translations.

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