
REBORN AS A
SPACE
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL
12
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro
Nabeshima

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It wasn't some kind of joke; she seemingly intended to squat here until we let her in.
Hiro
"I'll be in your care."
Serena
Konoha
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!


"That Maidroid... She said her name is Mei? She looks a lot like me."
Shouko
Mei

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I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL 12

WRITTEN BY

Ryuto

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.12
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Prologue

I WOKE TO A GENTLE PRESENCE. It breathed lightly, its clothes quietly rustled, and its soft, warm hands gently touched my cheeks. The tender presence was utterly devoid of hostility, violence, or malice.

"My lord, it is time to wake up."

"Mmm…" When I turned in the direction of the voice, a pair of golden eyes greeted me.

Their owner smiled. "Good morning, my lord."

"Yeah, morning." I closed my eyes for a moment, then sat up. *Okay.* My clothes were in order. Not that I had much on, since I slept wearing only my underpants. The important thing was that nothing about my appearance suggested a dalliance.

The silver-haired, golden-eyed girl with fox ears who'd awakened me—Kugi—blushed as she looked at me; I'd exposed my upper body when I sat up. Given the way she blushed at something so trivial, she was way too innocent. I found that rather refreshing.

Kugi was properly clothed, naturally. Not that I should've needed to mention that, since our relationship hadn't progressed that far yet. If I'd asked, Kugi probably would've agreed to that, considering how much she…idolized? worshipped…? me. Actually, without a doubt, she would've agreed. But I thought it'd be wrong to enter that kind of relationship with her right away.

It would've been a different story if she'd been an adult woman with lots of worldly experience, like Elma, but Kugi came off as very…pure? Sheltered? Like she needed someone to protect her? No, that wasn't quite right. Overly obedient?

I understood that she believed it to be her duty—no, her destiny—to offer me her body and soul, but it just didn't feel right to use that to take advantage of her.

"M-my lord? When you stare at me like that, it makes me restless…"

I'd fallen deep into thought while staring at Kugi. In turn, her face had reddened, and the fox ears atop her head twitched like

mad. Her reactions were simply too cute, tickling my mischievous side, but I reined it in. I operated on logic, not emotion.

“Sorry. I’m awake now. I’ll start getting ready.”

“O-okay… Um…excuse me, then.” Kugi bowed before hurriedly leaving the room.

Hmm… A nice smell lingered in the room, although I wasn’t sure what it was. It didn’t seem like perfume; perhaps it was some kind of incense? How come women gave off a nice smell that men didn’t? As a man who understood nothing about tasteful grooming, such things were a complete mystery to me.

“Well, I told Kugi I’m awake, so it’s time to get up.”

It was the start of another new day.

***

“Morning.”

“Good morning, Master Hiro.”

“Morning.”

After getting changed and doing the bare minimum to clean myself up in the washroom, I headed to the dining hall, where Mimi and Elma were preparing breakfast. I say “preparing,” but all they really had to do was get something to drink. Kitchen utensils came out of the automatic cooker along with the food ordered.

“Hm? Kugi isn’t here?” I asked. “I thought she’d arrive before me.”

“Did you do something to her?” Elma’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Of course not. I’m a right and proper gentleman.”

“Gentleman, you say…” Elma repeated, clearly doubtful.

Why treat me so suspiciously? I figured it was true that I’d immediately laid hands on Mimi and Elma once they’d boarded my ship, and that I’d wound up welcoming Mei, Tina, and Wiska aboard as well. Also, I was now alternating between the five of them…so I suppose calling myself a gentleman *was* a stretch.

“Well, Kugi’s situation is a bit special. I think it’s best to wait a while.”

“Is that so? Well, if that’s your decision, I won’t say anything.”

“This far into things, it might sound weird coming from me, but I need time to prepare myself too, you know.”

“I don’t recall you holding back when it came to me.”

“That’s true. I wonder why not? I can’t tell you for sure. But, yeah, I never really felt that way about you. Maybe because I thought *you’d* be the one to pamper *me*?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Elma asked. Her expression betrayed that she wasn’t entirely displeased.

On the day I’d found Mimi, she’d been in a terrible situation. If I hadn’t decided to look after her, she’d either have starved or met a fate worse than death. That was why she’d been prepared to come with me from the moment we met, and I’d just responded in kind to her resoluteness.

What about Elma, then? She too had been placed in an extremely unfortunate situation, and I’d happened to bail her out when she had nobody else to turn to. But as long as she got through those tough experiences, her vast experience and wealth of knowledge would make her even more reliable than I was, so taking her in hadn’t burdened me. I was able to rely on her expertise to help me out instead.

“I can pamper you too!” Mimi chimed in.

“Yay! Mommy!” I quipped.

“What a big baby…” Elma said flatly.

Mimi spread her arms to invite me in, so I dove into her cleavage. *Incredible.* Words couldn’t do it justice; it was simply overwhelming. She *was* a mommy. Her aura made me revert to infancy.

“Morning, hon… You guys start early, don’t ya?”

“Mgh…!”

An energetic voice had resounded through the dining hall, followed by one that sounded either displeased or frustrated.

“Yo. Morning, you two,” I replied. “Good start to the day, don’t you think?”

“How about getting your face out of Mimi’s boobs before greeting us, yeah?”

“I-I want to do that too!”

The voices’ owners approached me. One began slapping the back of my head while the other tugged my arm. But Mimi had no intention of handing me over; she hugged my head against her. *Wonderful. Wonderful…but a bit stuffy.* Thanks to the material of her clothes, I fortunately had just enough room to breathe. *Still, what a mystery—she smells so good, and her skin is so soft*. I’d have lived there forever if I could.

“Cut it out already,” Elma snapped. “Time for breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am. Let me try this again. Good morning, Tina, Wiska. Thanks, Mimi.”

When Elma scolded us, I’d obediently separated from Mimi, then greeted the twin dwarf mechanics, Tina and Wiska. I also made sure to thank Mimi. Boobs early in the morning were good for your health. I believed that, one day, they’d even be implemented as a cure for cancer; not that cancer was a concern in this universe. Even basic medical pods could apparently cure it.

“Morning, hon,” Tina chirped.

“Good morning. Later, you’ll let me do that too, right?” Wiska asked.

“You’re welcome!” Mimi said.

The three of us headed to where the Steel Chef 5 automatic cooker was waiting. Elma had already begun eating. She was working on a steaming-hot steak consisting of artificial meat, along with something resembling mashed potatoes. She sure could eat.

At around the same time we reached the automatic cooker, Kugi showed up. “S-sorry I’m late.”

Huh? Did she just take a bath? The one installed on the *Black Lotus* was fully automatic, taking care of you from the moment you entered to the moment you left. It even helped dry you off, so the telltale moisture that typically indicated recent bathing would be absent. Given how long I’d been in this universe, though, I’d become

able to determine whether someone had just bathed based on vibes alone.

"Don't sweat it," I told her. "It's not like you kept us waiting." *Hey, there's no reason for me to call her out.*

Having greeted Kugi, I began ordering from Steel Chef 5. After this, I planned to head to the training room, so I included that information in my order. That allowed Steel Chef 5 to create the optimal meal based on my current state and the vast library of data it had collected on me. *Tech is incredible.*

***

After enjoying a delicious meal created by Steel Chef 5 with everyone, I headed for the training room to work up a sweat. That was my typical morning routine. More accurately, that *plus* what was about to take place constituted my usual morning.

"Morning, Mei."

"Good morning, Master," Mei replied.

We exchanged these greetings as I entered the *Black Lotus*'s cockpit, where a beautiful woman in a maid outfit turned to face me. She had lovely waist-length black hair, and a pair of red-framed glasses adorned her eyes. The white mechanical parts protruding from her ears were polished to the point of sparkling. *Nice. Looks like my vision of the ultimate maid is functioning as normal.*

"How's the *Black Lotus*?" I asked Mei.

"Upgrades have resulted in increases of 28 percent in firepower and 31 percent in shield strength. Mobility has also improved by 12 percent."

"Good to hear. Specs can never be too high."

"It is as you say." Mei nodded. A thick cord coming from the nape of her neck connected her to the *Black Lotus*, granting her full control over the ship, which she ran and managed fully.

"No problems?" I asked.

"Correct. I detect no issues within the ship caused by upgrades. Miss Tina and Miss Wiska's in-depth inspection also did

not locate any."

"Is that so? Good, then. I always rely on you. Handling Tina and Wiska's transfer paperwork must've been quite a task, huh?"

"No." Mei shook her head, her expression not changing in the slightest. "A duty of that level isn't significant enough to be worth mentioning. Furthermore, serving and being of use to you are my sources of happiness."

I figured that, for a machine intelligence with vast processing power like Mei, the paperwork for transferring Tina and Wiska from Space Dwergr to my official crew was trivial. "I still want you to let me thank you. How about a reward? You always work so hard for me, I'd like to reward you in some concrete way."

"That is unnecessary. You purchased the *Black Lotus* and entrusted its management to me. That is already an honor beyond what I deserve."

"Oh, yeah?"

"But…if I am allowed to receive a reward despite that…" Mei spread her arms expressionlessly, inviting me to hug her. "I would also like permission to 'pamper' you, Master."

"Would that really serve as a reward for *you*, Mei?"

"Yes."

Wouldn't it be a reward for me *instead?* But Mei appeared serious, so I just nodded. "Only for a bit, since I still have plans after this."

"Of course. I am well aware; there is no need to worry." Mei continued to stand there with both arms spread wide, as if urging me forward.

Well, if that's how things stand, then excuse me!

The ensuing comfort was absolute paradise. In fact, I almost fell asleep in Mei's arms. Letting her "pamper" me was way too dangerous.

Chapter 1:
The Calm Before the Storm

NOW THEN…we'd had a carefree morning, some might say luxurious, but it was time to recap our situation. We were still in the Empire's number-one shipyard system, the Wyndas System, so no changes there. But the *Black Lotus*'s upgrades were finished, so we'd paid our bill at the hotel and returned to the ship. Tina and Wiska had finished the paperwork required to resign from Space Dwergr and officially join my mercenary unit—I figured we deserved to be labeled a "unit," since we had a mothership and two combat ships. And Elma's ship, the *Antlion*, had been completed and delivered. That was about it for updates.

"Is Elma in the *Antlion*?" I asked.

"Yes," Mei replied. "As that is to be her ship, it seems she couldn't wait."

After spending some time with Mei, I returned to the *Black Lotus*'s lounge. There, I found Mimi and Kugi standing side by side, using a tablet. Not that long ago, Kugi hadn't even known how to use a small terminal; she'd proven highly adaptable, however, and now had no issue with either those or tablets.

"How are your operator studies going, Kugi?" I asked.

"Greetings, my lord. They are quite a task, but I am practicing as much as I can."

I was about to tell her not to overdo it when a thought came to mind. Kugi *did* need to study to become an operator, so it was fine for her to continue learning on that front; however, it might not be a bad idea to see whether she also had the aptitude to become a pilot or copilot.

"Studying's important, but how about stepping outside for a bit?"

"Outside? Are we going somewhere?" Mimi asked, puzzled. It *had* been a rather abrupt request, so it was natural that she was confused.

As for Kugi, she simply looked up at me silently. She was unlikely to refuse a request from me either way.

“To the mercenary guild,” I added. “We’re going to borrow their simulators.”

***

“They seem awfully busy right now,” Kugi said.

“Hmm. I wonder if that’s got something to do with the edge-world expedition,” Mimi responded.

“Could it?” Kugi asked. “Will other mercenaries come with us as well?”

“Possibly,” I explained. “Heading to an edge world, we’ll want as much manpower as possible.”

Edge worlds were exactly what they sounded like—outer regions at the very edge of the Empire’s border territory that had only recently come under Imperial control. Space pirates; the mercenaries who hunted them, half of whom were unlicensed and virtually no different from pirates; explorers—mostly charlatans who passed off junk as “alien relics”—who hoped to strike gold by finding authentic relics and artifacts while investigating uncharted planets; space monsters; and unknown hostile nations… Those were the things you could expect to find in such regions of space.

Concerned about the situation in the edge worlds, the Emperor—or perhaps some military big shot—had sent Colonel Serena there to take care of things. We were going to join her mission. At least, that was the story. Our actual goal was to find out where the mysterious metal killer spiders immune to laser and plasma weapons came from, and if possible, figure out how they were made. If that proved too tall an order, they probably hoped that we’d at least acquire additional samples.

Given our destination, the more help we had the better. But Colonel Serena’s efforts to recruit mercenaries to her cause had likely caused the mercenary guild to become understaffed, leading to the current situation. I explained that theory to Kugi and Mimi as we headed toward the guild receptionist.

“Welcome. Are you here to accept a request? You are, correct? Oh, no need to say anything—just leave it to me. I’ll prepare the perfect one for you. Give me your ID, please.”

I felt bad for the receptionist, who spoke at a rapid speed, as I handed her my terminal. *I have to wonder—when you apply to be a receptionist, do looks factor in?* Every receptionist I’d met here had been a beauty.

“There’s my ID. We’re only here to borrow your simulator, though. I already got a direct request, so I can’t take any more work on.”

“Tch.”

W-wait. She definitely clicked her tongue just now, right? She’s got quite an attitude. I dig it. Not that I plan on doing anything about it.

Kugi glared. “How rude.”

“There, there…” Mimi cooed.

Kugi was so clearly enraged that even her tails seemed a bit bigger than usual. *I see. So if other people are rude to me, she doesn’t like it.* Watching Mimi try to calm her was really a novel experience. Although Kugi seemed older, Mimi had more experience living as a mercenary and as an operator, which was likely why she was more at ease. She’d grown so much.

“*Fine*. I granted you permission to use the simulator room. Knock yourselves out.”

Having clearly lost interest in us, the receptionist pointed toward the simulator room with a perfunctory “That way.” She must’ve had nerves of steel, since she didn’t react at all upon seeing my mercenary rank. I couldn’t help feeling that she’d make a good mercenary herself.

“What is it, Master Hiro?”

“Oh, nothing. Let’s go.”

Kugi was still glaring at the receptionist, so I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the simulator room. Our agenda today included rechecking Mimi’s piloting aptitude and checking whether Kugi had any. I had brought Mimi into a simulator before…and her aptitude definitely hadn’t been high, however generous you tried to be.

“Ahhhhh!”

Today was no different. In the simulator, Mimi was piloting a Zabuton—a cheap combat ship used by beginners—but she’d lost control, and it now spun randomly, firing lasers in every direction. Normal flight wasn’t a problem, but the second Mimi activated the weapon systems, this had been the result.

As for Kugi, her piloting was stable. This was her first time, so naturally there was still some clumsiness to her movements, but the fact that it was only *some* clumsiness was remarkable in and of itself. Though she hadn’t even been in the simulator for an hour, she could already control her ship, shoot down stationary targets with laser cannons, and even deal calmly with moving targets. With some training, she could definitely become a top-class pilot.

Hmm… It might be a good idea to change our plans. Should I pause Mimi’s training to become a copilot and instead have her focus on mastering the operator role? Then I could have Kugi train as a copilot instead. Of course, Mimi could overcome her current issues with enough practice… Actually, could she? Doing what she did took a special type of *talent*… In fact, how in the world *did* she do it? It might be time to accept reality.

“Okay. Mimi, let go of the control stick, and let the flight-assist system bring the ship to a stop. Kugi, keep it up; I think we can try moving on to something more challenging.”

As I coached them, I thought about how to broach the topic with Mimi. She was really excited about the prospect of learning to be a copilot. I definitely couldn’t just tell her directly that, due to her lack of talent, we were going to give up on that and have Kugi—the complete newbie—handle it instead. Knowing Mimi, I’m sure she would go along with that, but I didn’t want to destroy the good relationship the two of them were forming.

Hmm… At a time like this, it’s probably a good idea to consult Elma. Yeah, I’ll do that.

***

“You’re overthinking it.”

I was in the cockpit of the *Antlion*, a vessel newly made for Elma, who sat in the pilot's seat with a wry smile on her face.

"You're the ship's owner and captain," she continued. "So as the one in charge, you can do as you see fit."

"There's got to be more to it than that, right?" I grimaced in the copilot's seat. I didn't want to run my mercenary unit on the same logic that shady businesses used to exploit their workers.

"When it comes to things like this, you're pretty soft, aren't you? Hard to believe I'm talking to the guy who dives into gangs of space pirates or swarms of crystal life-forms without hesitation."

"Those aren't the same thing at all. Why would I hesitate to take on a winnable fight?"

"This is why your nickname among mercenaries is 'Psycho.' In any case, if Mimi can't maintain control of the ship during combat, then it'll be hard for her to become a pilot. She probably understands that better than anyone."

"But she might overcome that problem with enough practice. She can fire a gun now."

"She's only capable of *firing* it. Whether she could shoot a person is still a question."

"That's true, but still..."

Mimi did seem inherently unsuited to fighting. She must've had a good upbringing; in some respects, she might be even more sheltered than noble ladies or Imperial princesses. She'd been raised in a middle-class family on a colony, completely isolated from any conflict.

"She's not good at hand-to-hand either," Elma noted.

"She's probably not suited to anything that involves fighting. When it comes to simply training her body, though, she doesn't seem to struggle much."

"Rather than copilot, it might be better for her to pursue becoming a navigator or engineer."

By "engineer," Elma didn't mean a mechanic, like Tina or Wiska. Engineers were professionals responsible for managing various shipboard subsystems, such as the engines and shields. In *Stella*

Online, “engineer” was an NPC-exclusive profession that players couldn’t take on. In addition to boosting a ship’s basic specs and shield strength, an engineer would automate the usage of subsystems like shield cells and chaff. They were what you’d call flight engineers, specifically.

“Navigator” was also an NPC-exclusive profession. Their job was to improve a ship’s maximum speed and mobility during FTL travel, as well as to reduce the wait time when activating the FTL drive or hyperdrive. They also increased the speed at which a ship traveled in a hyperlane. They were essentially navigation officers.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “I was hoping to let Mimi pilot a transport ship at some point, then leave resupplying and trading to her.”

“That’s not a bad idea for the future. For now, though, I think it’d be a good call to get her some experience and training as an engineer or navigator. She could make use of that experience if she eventually captained a transport ship.”

“I see. That’s true.”

As long as that’ll benefit Mimi’s career in the long run, I guess it’s fine. Mimi could always just hire a pilot and instead serve as her ship’s overall commander. In fact, she might be better suited to that, given her temperament.

“When you tell her, make sure not to leave out the part about her eventually commanding a transport or supply ship. Actually—I’ll just come with you.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Elma. You really are dependable.”

“Of course I am. I’ve got *way* more experience than you,” Elma boasted, her expression confident. Let me correct that: *smug*.

But she was right, and I *was* relying on her, so I couldn’t say anything.

“I don’t mind you relying on me,” she added. “It’s kind of flattering that you came to me first, rather than Mei.”

“You see her as a rival?”

“It’s not that serious. I’m just happy that you’re relying on me, that’s all. Let’s go. No time like the present.” Elma rose from the pilot’s seat and offered me her hand.

I took it, rising from the copilot's seat. She was right; it would be best to take care of something like this as soon as possible. Time to go find Mimi.

***

"So yeah, what do you think?"

"I see…"

We'd returned to the *Black Lotus* and had found Mimi drinking tea with Kugi. After I told her what I'd just discussed with Elma, she lowered her head and closed her eyes. Then she raised her head again, her expression serious, and asked, "Master Hiro, we'll be together forever, right?"

That was really a heavy question. However, I'd long known the answer, so it didn't faze me a bit. "That's the plan. As long as you don't get tired of me, I intend for us to be together forever."

"It's fine, then. I want to do whatever lets me be of the most use to you, Master Hiro."

"I'm happy to hear you say that, but you should think about your own future as well, Mimi."

"I'll be with *you* in the future, Master Hiro. That's why I want to learn whatever allows me to be most useful to you."

Heavy. Very heavy. "Fine, then. In that case, start looking into what it takes to be a navigator or engineer, and study whichever you find suits you better. It's probably easier to transition from an operator to a navigator, but I'll leave that for you to decide."

"Understood. That means you'll train Kugi as a copilot, right?" Mimi asked, looking over at Kugi, who'd been watching us from nearby. We weren't trying to keep our conversation secret, so Kugi had likely overheard us. In fact, she *had* to have overheard, as her ears started twitching when Mimi looked over and spoke her name. *Cute*.

"That's the plan," I replied. "This will also serve to clearly delineate both your responsibilities."

“Got it. I’ll do my best,” Mimi said, breaking into a radiant smile.

If we intended to become a proper mercenary unit, we had to start taking a long-term view of things too. That said, I didn’t plan to expand our group much, or we’d end up with more people than I could handle. I also didn’t want to take in anyone that we couldn’t fully trust.

As I was about to tell Mimi not to overdo it, a loud, happy-go-lucky voice echoed throughout the dining hall.

“Sup, everybody?! Man, I’m beat! How’s everyone doing?”

“Sis, control yourself a little…” Tina and Wiska entered the room in a jovial headspace, as if quitting Space Dwergr had taken a load off their minds. Actually, only the older sister, Tina, was acting unusual. *She’s not drinking on the job, is she?*

“Huh? Were y’all talking about something serious?” she asked.

“*Y’all* were,” I ribbed her.

“Sowwy?”

“Ah, fine. I’ll let you off this time.”

“Yay! You’re so generous, hon,” Tina cheered, raising both hands in the air. She really was unusually energetic. Had she *actually* been drinking on the job? *Been hitting the sauce? Cough into this for me, please.*

“She’s sober,” Wiska assured me. “I’m so sorry about this. She’s been like this all day.”

“Just make sure she isn’t injured on the job.”

“Okay.” Wiska seemed to have secondhand embarrassment over her sister’s actions. That girl had her own struggles.

***

Okay…we’d decided on a future course for Mimi and Kugi, Elma’s ship had been finished and delivered, and the *Black Lotus*’s upgrades were also completed. It had been a while since we’d last roamed around and shot at things in space, so if possible, I really would’ve liked to get to work. Unfortunately, the Imperial Fleet—or

to be more precise, Colonel Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit—was our current employer, and we'd been ordered to wait on standby until the fleet was ready to depart. I couldn't imagine the consequences that would await us if we left Wyndas Tertius without permission; we definitely wouldn't get off with just a scolding. That was why, although it wasn't what I preferred, I was stuck on standby with nothing to do.

Frankly, even if we'd gone out on a little trip, the star system we were in was basically the Imperial Fleet's backyard. If I wanted to hunt down pirates, I'd have to travel three—for best results, five or six—times on hyperlanes before I'd arrive someplace where I could earn proper cash. It'd take several days, and that wasn't counting the time it would take to come back. It wasn't a distance one could travel in a quick twenty-minute adventure. Honestly, if I pulled something like that during a military operation, I'd definitely be labeled a deserter.

"Is that why you came here to watch us work?" Wiska asked.

"You really must not have anything better to do, hon," Tina added.

"It's pretty fun lazing around, watching other people work."

"Oh, you're here to rile us up? Bring it on, hon." Tina took out a plasma tool that looked like it was meant for disassembling monsters.

I immediately surrendered, requesting "Spare me!" *Aren't there rules against pointing those things at people?!* "This is a little more boring than I expected."

"What *were* you expectin'?" Tina asked. "The *Krishna*, *Black Lotus*, and *Antlion* are all in pristine shape."



“There’s not much for us to do right now, apart from prep spares for parts that wear out quickly or take a while to duplicate,” Wiska added. “But we’re currently tuning up the maintenance and combat bots, and I guess we could do that for some of our tools and facilities too.”

“I see…”

The two girls were surrounded by maintenance bots of various forms. Only a few were humanoid, with most being either sturdy multi-legged bots with a single powerful arm each, or work bots that seemed designed to handle multiple tasks. A few also looked like drones. Those were likely used for work on elevated areas. They floated in the air using what seemed to be the same gravity-control technology employed for the pointlessly high-tech drink holders.

“That said, maintenance bots are now capable of maintaining each other,” Wiska explained. “And military combat bots come with a custom automated maintenance system. So they really don’t take much upkeep.”

“We spend most of our maintenance time on tools we use,” Tina added.

“Do you guys *ever* actually have to do maintenance yourselves?” I asked.

With this many maintenance bots, I assumed it was unlikely that they’d ever have to use those tools of theirs.

“Not when we’re working on the *Krishna*, *Black Lotus*, or *Antlion*,” Tina replied. “But when we scavenge parts from pirate ships or take them apart and rebuild them, we gotta do the work ourselves.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“We did have to maintain the *Krishna* manually at first,” Wiska added. “There weren’t any templates we could work from.”

“Oh, right. That’s true.” The *Black Lotus* was designed by Space Dwergr, while the *Antlion* had been designed by Ideal Starways. The *Krishna*, however, had appeared along with me when I found myself in this universe. It was a mystery who’d built it, and parts of it were a complete “black box.” Fortunately, it had similarities with this universe’s ships, making it possible to repair. If any of those “black-

box" parts were damaged, though, there was a good chance they'd be irreparable. *The* Krishna *is actually our unit's most troublesome ship, huh?*

"We're slowly progressing," Tina said. "We made a work template for basic repairs, so as long as the *Krishna* doesn't suffer extreme damage, we should be able to fix it."

"We prioritized the sections most prone to wear and tear, like the thrusters and retractable arm-style weapon holsters," Wiska added. "We've made good progress analyzing the other parts so we can repair those too. Everything involving the generator is still a complete mystery, though."

"Given it's you, hon, I don't need to say this, but avoid any direct hits to the generator, okay?"

"If it broke, we'd be pretty much screwed anyway."

It was a no-brainer, but the generator was a spaceship's most important component and its greatest weakness. Direct damage to the generator would mean that both the shields and plating had been pierced, and that the ship's vital parts were being riddled with holes. Under those circumstances, the people aboard the ship would also be in dire straits. They'd be lucky to eject before the ship exploded.

"That's enough about the *Krishna*. When are we leaving? We're kind of running out of ways to kill time."

"What'll you two do once you're out of work?" I asked.

"Hmm... Study, I suppose?" Wiska answered. "We make sure to study at least a little every day."

"Study?" I repeated. That was the last word I expected to hear come out of her mouth.

"We're engineers," Tina declared. "We gotta keep ourselves up-to-date on the latest materials and techniques. An outdated engineer who can't repair the latest models is no more than a mooch."

"Yep."

"Treat any expenditures related to your studies as business expenses," I instructed, "and send them to me. I'll pay for them. Just don't go too crazy with it."

“Seriously? You’re the best, hon,” Tina said with a bright grin.

“Thank you!” Wiska smiled.

“I’ll have Mei double-check the numbers.”

“Gah… Y-you don’t need to worry that we’ll overspend.”

But I wanted to warn them in advance just in case. I didn’t know anything about engineering, so I’d have no way of knowing whether whatever expenses they claimed were reasonable. Leaving that to Mei was best. It would add a bit to her workload, but it was a necessity.

“By the way, hon, do you really not have anythin’ to do?”

“Nothing at all.”

Elma was busy configuring the *Antlion*, while Mimi and Kugi were studying under Mei, preparing for their new careers. As for me, I couldn’t take on any new responsibilities at the moment, so I was just on standby with nothing else to do. That explained why I was here bothering Tina and Wiska while they worked; I had *that* little to do. I suppose I could’ve watched a holo-movie, or exercised a bit more in the training room, but doing that by myself made me feel a bit empty inside.

“You get lonely easily, don’t you, hon?”

“Huh…? Well, I guess so.”

I’d been alone for a short while after arriving in this universe, but it hadn’t been long before I took in Mimi, and then Elma a few days later. After that, I was pretty much always with either Mimi or Elma. Then we picked up Mei, Tina, and Wiska, so I was with someone else almost constantly. But I had spent most of my time solo in my previous life.

“Hmm… Well, it’s not like we’ve got anything urgent to work on.”

“That’s true. Is there anything you’d like to do, Hiro?”

Both girls looked at me with kind smiles.

Stop it, would you? Why’re you two acting so motherly? I was filled with an inexplicable ticklish feeling.

At that point, I went with the twins to their quarters, where we had a nice time watching holo-movies.

***

“Hey, hon…”

“Hm?”

Tina started to ask me a question just when we’d just finished watching the second holo-movie. It was about a researcher and explorer of primeval civilizations who’d crash-landed on a planet ruled by such a civilization. In this universe, the term “primeval civilizations” referred to those yet to develop interstellar travel. The researcher communicated and bonded with the planet’s people, then finally left them and returned to space.

It was one of those documentary-esque movies. Not everything in it was necessarily true, but it was apparently based on events that had happened. Making contact with primeval civilizations and their people was normally illegal, as it violated the Protection of Space Culture Act. The perpetrator of such contact wouldn’t be prosecuted if the event was an uncontrollable accident. Still, they’d have to be careful to limit the contact they had, and to ensure that they didn’t affect the civilization’s technological development.

Anyway, back to Tina.

“Hon, aren’t *you* basically a primeval person?”

“Oh… I guess so. In my world—well, the planet I lived on—outer space was considered really far away. We weren’t even close to interstellar travel.”

There might’ve been theories on how to achieve it, but that wasn’t something I’d have known about, given my limited understanding of the subject. I knew there was some International Space Station, and that countries were developing rockets all over the world, but I’d never encountered any of that stuff myself.

“Are we violating the Protection of Space Culture Act by talking to you?”

“Probably not. I’m an official citizen of the Grakkan Empire. Kind of late to be asking that question, huh?”

“Good point. Do you ever get homesick, hon?”

“Hmm… Well, I’ve given up on going back home for several reasons.”

“Several reasons?” Wiska asked from my left. She’d been silently listening to me and Tina talk. In case you were wondering, yes, the twins were sandwiching me on the sofa. A situation like this would’ve been unimaginable in my previous life. I must’ve done a lot of good deeds then to be so blessed in this one. Not that I recalled any. Actually, considering how many dangerous situations I’d been dragged into in this universe, maybe I was more unfortunate than fortunate.

“First of all, as far as I know, the planet I lived on was called Earth, and it was the Solar System’s third planet. It was what we’d refer to as ‘Solar III.’”

“If you know that much, shouldn’t you be able to find a way back?” Tina asked.

“‘Solar System’ and ‘Earth’ are names earthlings made up. In other words, names used by a primeval civilization yet to achieve interstellar travel. Could you find those names registered anywhere on the Galaxy Map?”

“Oh… Ah, I see.” She seemed to understand what I was getting at.

From the point of view of earthlings, Earth was the Solar System’s third planet, but the Galaxy Map used by the people of spacefaring civilizations might have referred to the Solar System by an entirely different name; for example, the Sparkly Sun System. Thus, I had no way of finding my home planet on the Galaxy Map. I’d tried searching not only for the Solar System but also nearby systems like Alpha Centauri and Tau Ceti, but I couldn’t find any of those either.

“If I were some amazing astronomer, I might be able to calculate where the Solar System should be among the infinite star systems that exist. Unfortunately, I’m just a normal guy lacking that kind of specialized knowledge. That’s the first reason.”

“I see. Would you be willing to share the other reasons as well?” Wiska asked.

“Sure. If we’re to take everything Kugi said at face value, then I came from an alternate universe—a universe with high potential. I have no idea what that really entails, but I imagine that it means some supernatural force brought me here across spacetime.”

“As an engineer, I can’t say I like explanations that involve some kinda mysterious *force* that did somethin’ *inexplicable*,” Tina objected, looking unsatisfied.

“I don’t know any more than I’m telling you,” I answered, shrugging. Kugi’s theory was the only one that explained how I’d arrived in this universe with the *Krishna*. “Anyway, back to what I was talking about. Even if this universe is theoretically the same one I came from, how distant is the time I was living on Earth from the time I’m living in right now?”

The twins looked puzzled, seemingly not understanding exactly what I meant.

“In other words—ignoring the fact that I somehow just ended up here—even if my home planet exists somewhere out there, how much time separates it from the era I’m living in right now? This time period might be far in the future for me, or way in the past. On a galactic scale, several thousand—or even tens of thousands—of years go by in the blink of an eye. That’s the second reason.”

“Oh. You’re saying that, when you arrived here, you may not just have traveled through space but also through time. And regardless of whether you went back or forward in time, there’s no guarantee you still have somewhere to return to, given how vast space is.”

“Yeah. Never mind tens of thousands of years; just a hundred years would be too big a difference.”

Even in this era, when medical breakthroughs had significantly increased lifespans, several centuries was a really long time. Enough time for several generations to come and go.

“Even if I could return to the system I came from, would I still have a home there to go back to? That’s the problem. Plus, even if by some miracle I could go back, and not that much time had passed, I’d still have to address very serious problems.”

“Very serious problems?”

“I’m now a citizen of the Grakkan Empire, and as far as I know, the planet I came from is an undiscovered primeval planet. Imperial law and the Protection of Space Culture Act would both prevent me from going back. On top of that, even if I wanted to return, I couldn’t just land on the planet piloting the *Krishna*. That’s the third reason.”

The *Krishna* was pretty big. Unless I figured out a way to hide it, even Earth’s technology should be capable of detecting it. And detecting the *Krishna* would likely plunge the world into chaos. It’d be like encountering an actual UFO, and the resulting upheaval would be unavoidable.

“Hmm… I see. Factoring all that in, returning doesn’t seem realistic at all.”

“Nope. Anyway, I never had much that tied me to Earth to begin with. If I said I had no regrets, I’d be lying, and I do feel bad for suddenly disappearing, but I wouldn’t give up my current lifestyle to go back.”

“I see. Don’t you get sad sometimes, though?” Tina asked, looking at me with a somewhat worried expression.

“Thinking that I’ll never be able to go home does make me a bit sad, but the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* are essentially my new homes. I also have you and Wiska here to worry about me. As far as I’m concerned, this is my home. It’s a place for me to return to. So I’m fine.”

If I were hypothetically thrown into another world again with just the *Krishna*, I’d do whatever it took to return *here*, to where the *Black Lotus* and everyone in the crew would be waiting for me. I couldn’t imagine something like that happening twice, but since it had happened once, there was no guarantee it wouldn’t happen again. I’d also been a real magnet for trouble ever since coming to this universe. *Please, make it stop already.*

“How do you keep a straight face while you drop those cheesy lines, hon?” Tina asked, trying to play off her embarrassment. Her face and ears completely red, she began poking my thighs with her fingers. *Hey. I’m ticklish there. Wait—how come it feels like Wiska’s pushing up against me more than she was earlier?*

“I don’t do it on purpose. Hey… Is this going where I think it is?”

“…It’s rude to put that into words, Hiro.”

“We’ll act as weights to keep you here and stop you from suddenly disappearing.”

“I see.”

It was going where I thought, and putting that into words *would* be rude.

Chapter 2:
The Tanuki Samurai Girl

"I'LL BE IN YOUR CARE."

The next day, Konoha—the tanuki samurai girl who was a guard and military officer of the Holy Verthalz Empire—showed up at the *Black Lotus* carrying her things in a furoshiki with a *karakusa* pattern. She was asking for permission to board. It wasn't some kind of joke; she seemingly intended to squat here until we let her in. Her expression made it clear that she hadn't even considered the possibility of being refused.

I'd still been feeling good, thanks to the night I'd spent with the mechanic twins, but this new situation put a damper on my mood immediately. As for why—imagine if a veritable one-person army capable of tearing apart a combat ship with their bare hands had suddenly showed up at *your* house. Wouldn't that have freaked *you* out?

"Colonel...?"

"I'll explain..."

Beside Konoha stood Colonel Serena, wearing an expression I'd never seen on her face. It looked as if she had a stomachache; she was slouching too. I'd never seen her so beaten down.

"Uh...well, let's talk more inside, then. I'll show you guys to the dining hall."

"Many thanks." Konoha bowed, still carrying her furoshiki like a backpack.

"Thank you," Serena said, continuing to stroke her stomach. *Do nobles still get queasy when stressed, despite their physical augmentations?*

Keeping that question to myself, I guided the pair to the *Black Lotus*'s dining hall. On the way there, we passed the lounge in which Kugi and Mimi were studying, so I waved at them. Then, opening the door to the dining hall, I invited Konoha and Serena to enter.

"For now, sit wherever you'd like, and feel free to put your things down. You can use a table if you want. Want anything to

drink? No? All right, let's get down to business, then." I sat across from them and prepared to hear them out. I needed to know exactly what they wanted before I reached any decisions. To be honest, if Konoha was insistent, I'd have no choice but to knuckle under. That tanuki girl had crushed those incredibly sturdy metal spiders with her bare hands. If she decided to cause trouble here, she'd completely destroy the *Black Lotus*.

"I'll get straight to the point," said Colonel Serena. "I'd like you to take Lady Konoha with you on your ship."

"Why...?"

I'd reacted to her request with an extremely blunt—even by my standards—question. After all, how else was I supposed to respond? I had no idea why Konoha would be coming along on this expedition, and even if she did, why on my ship? This was something the Grakkan Empire and the Holy Verthalz Empire should've negotiated between themselves. And, if they decided to cooperate, then Konoha should've been on an Imperial ship, rather than one of mine.

"I'll explain. This decision wasn't made until after I'd recruited you, but Lady Konoha will be accompanying us on this expedition. She'll know more than I do about the circumstances that led up to this."

"Yes," Konoha said. "Sir Hiro should've noticed this when we fought those spider things, but they were sentient. In fact, their thought waves were quite potent. They were clearly made using magic—or what you call psionic technology. They are living weapons, but it might be more accurate to refer to them as a type of living terminal."

"I did feel something similar to telepathy from them. Since you're consciously calling them 'terminals,' rather than 'weapons,' are they *not* some type of weapon?"

"I'm not a specialist in this field, so I'm not versed in the fine details. From a warrior's point of view, though, they definitely aren't weapons. If they were made to be weapons, why would they only be capable of physical attacks? I believe they were likely created as tools for mining or other such tasks. If an expert from the temple were here, they could provide a more detailed analysis."

“I see. I understand that psionic technology was involved in making those spiders. How’d that lead to the current situation?”

I had suspected that the spiders were somehow connected to psionic technology, but that didn’t explain why the Holy Verthalz Empire was getting involved. Did they need to stick their nose into an incident on the frontiers of a foreign country so far away?

“A living terminal using unknown psionic technology appeared from outside the normal range of human activity. That terminal was also discovered alive, which means there’s a chance that the owner of the terminal, or the device controlling it, is still out there. That owner or device may pose a significant threat. Or it may seal an even greater threat.” Konoha began matter-of-factly narrating terrifying possibilities.

I didn’t dare say this aloud, but if an extremely dangerous, psionic technology-related threat were to be unleashed, the Grakkan Empire would likely struggle to deal with it; they weren’t familiar with that kind of technology. At least, that must have been Verthalz’s thinking.

“That’s why the Holy Verthalz Empire is getting involved? Is the Grakkan Empire okay with Verthalz intervening in its domestic affairs?”

“Since the incident is unfolding in one of its outermost regions, the Empire is choosing to be flexible. The Holy Verthalz Empire is quite far away, and it’s unlikely they would have any interest in the Grakkan Empire’s furthest regions. The Holy Verthalz Empire also has a reputation to consider.”

“Reputation?”

“It is our duty to deal with space monsters and other threats to the galaxy.”

“That’s how it is,” said Colonel Serena. “It’s pretty much common sense among intergalactic empires to hand these types of incidents over to the Holy Verthalz Empire to deal with. They have a track record, and although they proactively involve themselves in this kind of problem, they don’t demand any renumeration.”

Konoha shook her head. “That’s not true. We receive permission to accompany you, and we enjoy the lodgings you

prepare for us, so it would be inaccurate to say we receive no renumeration."

From the point of view of intergalactic empires overseeing multiple star systems, something that trivial couldn't even be considered an expense. *Still, "it is our duty to deal with threats to the galaxy"? Kugi said something similar—something about how that's the only reason for their existence. It's some ideology they follow, I suppose.*

"I see. I understand now why Konoha is coming with us on this expedition, but why aboard my ship?"

From my point of view, that was the biggest mystery. She was here to assist us during the expedition, but there was no need for her to come along on the *Black Lotus*. She could just catch a ride on an Imperial ship.

"About that…" Serena began.

"I requested it," said Konoha.

"Why?" I asked flatly.

"I figured that, while I was at it, I might as well check on how our shrine maiden is doing," she said, staring directly at me.

I felt a touch of hostility in that gaze. *What's she trying to do here?*

Serena chose her words carefully, attempting to make up for Konoha's attitude. "It's a fact that there's already another citizen of the Holy Verthalz Empire aboard, and Lady Konoha's also requesting to travel with you. Furthermore, it's highly probable that she'd be subject to inconveniences in the name of operational security aboard an Imperial ship."

It's very unusual to see Colonel Serena act like this. Her superiors must've stressed to her that she had to make this work. Sucks.

"That's why you want her to board my ship instead? Well, we do have the space, and it's not like we're unacquainted with Konoha. I don't have anything to hide, and since we have the room, I guess I'm not totally against it."

"Then—" Serena, clearly relieved…

"But, although I'm not against it, I don't have a reason to accept her either."

…froze immediately upon hearing me continue.

Sorry. I didn't mean to get your hopes up… Actually, yes, I did, but I didn't expect that strong a reaction. Still, this is your own fault.

"Um…why are you being so mean?" Konoha asked suspiciously.

Left with no other option, I decided to explain. "I'm not trying to be mean. I'm being asked to transport a VIP from a foreign country to an edge region. That's not a job I can just take on saying, 'Yeah, sure.' You'll have to follow my orders while you're on my ship. It's irresponsible for the Empire to simply throw VIPs at mercenaries without prior agreements or contracts. I have no interest in becoming the Empire's scapegoat if something happens to you. This isn't a plan that can be agreed on with verbal promises. There's also the matter of your living costs. You'll still have to breathe, eat, and drink water aboard my ship. You'll be using shipboard facilities that I paid for out of my own pocket, and you'll be given a room that I paid for."

"Are you trying to extort me?" Konoha glared at me.

Please don't do that; it's terrifying. I wasn't stupid enough to say it to her face, but accepting her aboard the *Black Lotus* would be a significant risk in and of itself, since she was capable of crushing a squadron of soldiers in power armor with her bare hands.

"Since the Grakkan Empire is making the request, they should be the ones to pay," I continued. "Just to be clear, I'm not trying to make a quick buck here. Your presence won't significantly affect our life-support systems or supplies, and we've got plenty of empty rooms. But this isn't a simple request I can accept without going through proper channels; it's a matter of life and death. I have a responsibility to protect my crew."

Hearing my reasoning, Konoha sheathed her hostility. She even seemed somewhat impressed. "I see. You take your responsibilities as the group's leader seriously."

"In my own way, yeah. So what does the Empire have to say about this? You surely have at least one solution prepared for this obvious issue, right?"

“Well…yes. Here’s the contract. It’ll be a direct one, not a contract through the mercenary guild. And it will be upheld by the Empire and Imperial Fleet.” Serena had been watching our conversation in anxious silence. Clearly exhausted, she sent the contract to my terminal.

I glanced through the document and didn’t notice anything objectionable. I did skim some of the more detailed conditions, though, so there might’ve been pitfalls I missed. But in a nutshell, the Imperial Fleet would pay us 1000 Ener for each day we hosted and protected Konoha, which included her food costs. I didn’t know whether that was the going rate for protecting a VIP, but all we were offering in return was whatever food, water, and air Konoha consumed. It was pretty much straight profit for us.

In the event that Konoha was caught in crossfire and suffered lethal injury, we wouldn’t be blamed. Of course, that was only if we didn’t harm her intentionally. As for any personal disputes that might occur between us and Konoha, they were to be settled on a personal level. Neither the Grakkan Empire nor the Holy Verthalz Empire would interfere. That took for granted that any such problems wouldn’t escalate to the point of bloodshed. In any case, as long as we didn’t act maliciously toward each other, there wouldn’t be any problems.

“I see. Mei.”

“Yes, Master.”

The moment I’d called for her, the dining room’s holographic display had activated and projected an image of Mei.

She had full control over every nook and cranny of the *Black Lotus*, so if some trouble related to Konoha occurred, Mei could respond immediately.

“Double-check this contract’s contents for me. If there are no issues, we’ll accept.”

“Understood. Check complete. No issues detected.”

Mei could review even a document this long in the blink of an eye. That said, it wouldn’t be good to completely stop looking over contracts myself, so I made sure to at least glance through them.

Since Mei hadn't uncovered any problems with this contract, it should be fine. "Everything's good, then. Welcome aboard, Temple Guard Officer Konoha Hagakure. You'll be with us on the *Black Lotus* until we reach the outermost region."

Konoha bowed in response to my welcome. "Thank you. Thank you as well, Colonel Serena."

Serena also looked relieved, as if a burden had finally been lifted from her shoulders.

Unfortunately for her, I wasn't completely done yet. "One last thing. I take no responsibility for any damage your reputation suffers as a consequence of your choice to board my ship."

"Huh? Damage my reputation suffers…?" Konoha asked with a quizzical look.

Wait. Isn't the implication of a woman boarding a man's mercenary ship supposedly common knowledge? Even Mimi knew about it. Maybe it's different in Verthalz?

Serena, who had finally seemed to relax, immediately froze.

Sorry about this, but these things need to be clarified from the get-go. "Aside from me, everyone aboard my ship is female. I've also laid hands on all—er, actually, I haven't touched Kugi yet—*most* of them. That's the kind of ship you're boarding. You should be able to imagine how doing so will affect your reputation."

"…I see." Konoha gave me a probing look. She must've realized what I meant. Since she wasn't using psionic powers to probe my thoughts, Konoha—like Kugi—must've believed that magic wasn't meant to be used willy-nilly.

"I have no intention of doing anything to you. Still, it's possible that society at large will assume I did. If that happens, I'm not taking responsibility. If you understand the potential consequences and still want to board, feel free."

Konoha stared at me for a bit before nodding. "Understood. I don't mind." I doubted that she meant that as in "I don't mind getting into that kind of relationship with you." She probably just didn't care what people thought of her.

"Then it's decided. You must be happy, Colonel."

“Yes, very happy. Honestly…” Colonel Serena, who could finally relax for real, revealed an expression of relief—or, at least, almost did. Her expression shifted midway through as she shot me a guarded look.

I’m sorry, okay? I’m done now.

***

“There are many people here I haven’t met before. My name is Konoha Hagakure. I’m a military officer from the Holy Verthalz Empire. My job is to protect my country’s temple in the Wyndas Tertius colony as a guard. The Grakkan Empire is investigating ruins discovered in an outermost region, and I’m joining the investigation as an advisor.”

“That about sums it up,” I declared. “She’ll ride with us on the trip there, for various reasons—the complexities of international relations and all that. As for the rules aboard this ship, I’m hoping to have you girls show her the ropes. Certain things are more conveniently handled among women without a guy like me butting in.”

“I’ll be in your care.” Konoha bowed.

I’d had everyone gather in the lobby, then introduced them to the guest. Of the people in my group, only Kugi, Mei, and I had already met her, but I had told the full crew the story of Konoha destroying those metal killer spiders.

“Nice to meet you, Konoha! I’m Mimi!”

“Sup. I’m Elma. Let’s get along.”

“I’m Tina! Nice to meet ’cha.”

“I’m Wiska. Nice to meet you.”

As the girls introduced themselves, Kugi watched with a smile. Although her ears were perked up, she wasn’t wagging her tails. *Hmm? Is she on guard for some reason?*

“Kugi?”

“Yes, my lord?” Kugi asked, trotting over to me.

Drawing close to her fox ears, I whispered, “Oh, uh…I was wondering if you needed to say something? Everything okay?”

Perhaps finding my breath ticklish, Kugi twitched her ears. “I-I’m fine. It’s nothing like that,” she answered, looking up at me and blushing. *Hmm… Is she really okay? I doubt Kugi would ever* lie *to me, but I could see her pretending she was fine with something when she wasn’t.*

“If there’s a problem, be sure to let me know.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you for being so concerned over my well-being,” Kugi said, flashing me a dazzling smile. She was likely smiling for real now, since her tails wagged a bit. But that also meant that her previous smile to Konoha *hadn’t* been totally real.

There might be something there… I’ll just keep an eye on the two of them for now, though. “Okay. Time to unpack your luggage for a bag check.”

“Bag check?” Konoha questioned me, furrowing her brows.

I dismissed her concerns with a wave. “I don’t mean in the security sense; I’m asking you to check your luggage to make sure you’re not forgetting anything. We’re headed to an outermost region, so even if we use gateways, it’ll be a long trip. Since we’re traveling alongside the Imperial Fleet, we won’t be able to drop by colonies to resupply whenever we want. You need to make sure you’re stocked up on any daily necessities. Since there’re a lot of females aboard, you could probably borrow what you need from the others. There’s no guarantee that their products will suit you, though, so it’s better if you prep what you need yourself. Our crew has lots of experience with long trips, so feel free to ask them for advice.”

“I see. Very well… I’ll be in your care.”

“Yeah. In any case, we’re not going anywhere until the Imperial Fleet is ready. Get to know the crew, and prepare whatever you need for the voyage.”

“Okay,” Konoha said, nodding obediently.

She’s…easier to manage than I expected. She’s very earnest, and she has good self-control—or maybe it’d be better to say that she’s

rational. Actually, for some reason, the word "honest" seems to suit her best. At any rate, I find people like her easy to interact with.

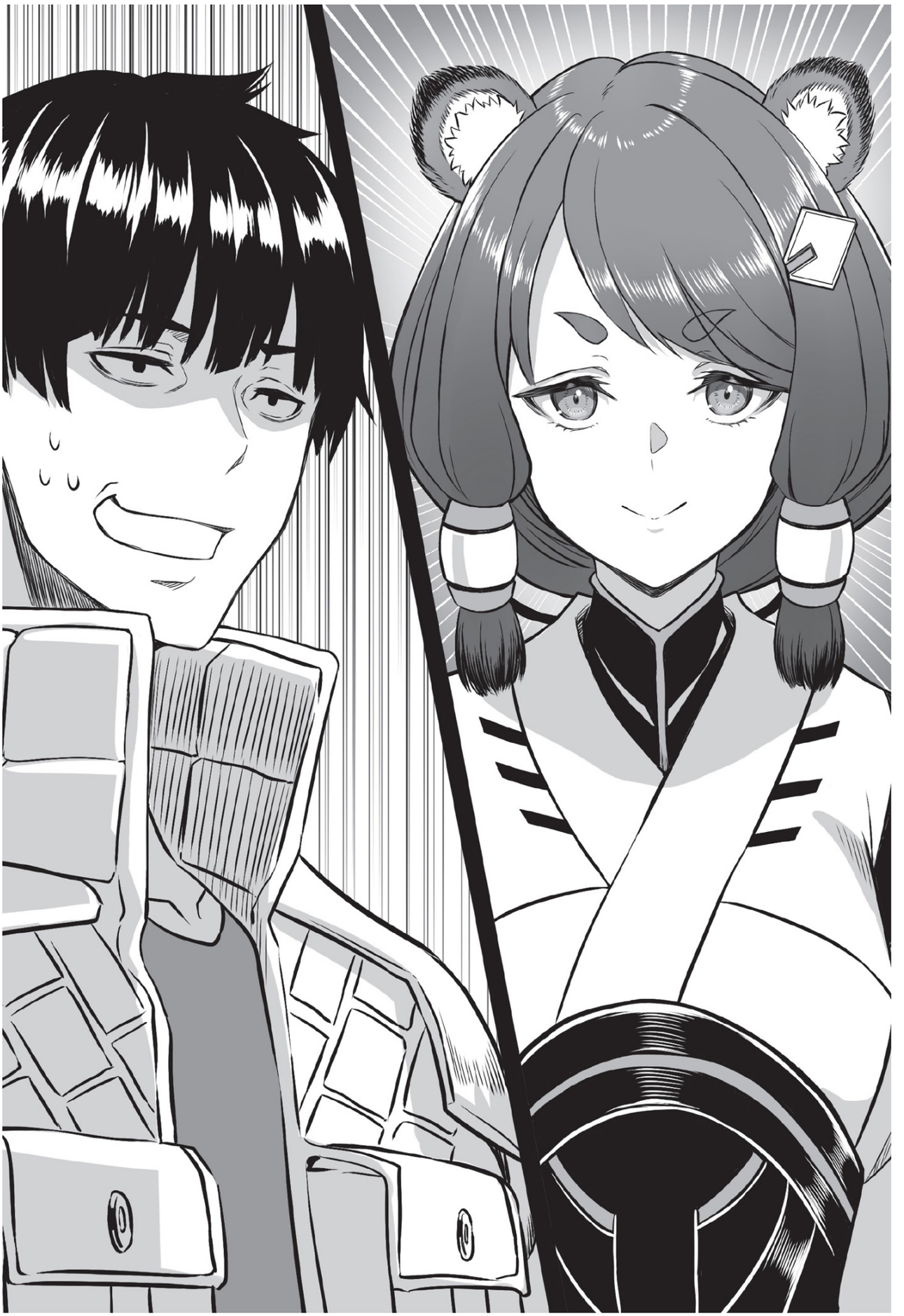
"By the way, what will you be doing, Sir Hiro?"

"I've already got everything I need, but I'm not exactly at liberty to go out hunting pirates right now. I've already finished my workout for the day, so my current plan is to just laze around."

"Do you not find that a bit slovenly...?"

"I think using all your free time to train is unhealthy. Tense strings are easy to cut."

"Just train them until they're too tough to be cut." This damn tanuki girl was being serious. With a capital "S." She actually wasn't joking.



“Ah…so you’re a musclehead?” It seemed that my initial impression that she was easy to manage was completely wrong.

***

“Delicious! D-did an automatic cooker really make this?”

“Shocking, isn’t it?”

Konoha was in a state of shock as she ate a meal prepared by Steel Chef 5—oddly enough, something similar to the Japanese-style meals I ate. Seated next to her, Kugi nodded, clearly just as impressed as Konoha. *A tanuki and a fox eating beside each other… How cute. Just watching them fills me with warmth.*

We’d unpacked Konoha’s luggage and given her a tour of the ship, finishing just in time for dinner, and we’d decided to all eat together.

“Now that I think about it,” I said, “automatic cookers aren’t common in Verthalz, right?”

“Correct,” said Kugi. “In my country, people prepare and cook ingredients themselves.”

“In space, we usually need ready-to-eat preserved meals,” Konoha added. “We can’t exactly build a fire in a colony like this.”

“Yeah, that’s impossible,” I replied. “It *is* possible to acquire heat-based cooking devices, but fresh ingredients are absolute luxuries out here.”

“Yes… They really are,” Konoha said in a heavy voice. Both her round ears and her tail were trembling.

Ah. She clearly speaks from personal experience. She must’ve gotten tired of the taste of preserved meals and gone to buy fresh ingredients in the city, only to be hit with the reality that she couldn’t afford them.

“While we’re on the topic,” she continued, “don’t you find the food in this country irksome? The only foodstuffs you can acquire at a low cost are either reaching their expiration date, expired military rations that were discarded, or preserved food that tastes awful. And cheap restaurants only serve junk food made by poor-quality

automatic cookers. Shouldn't there be a way to acquire proper—ah… This is *so* good." Having taken another bite of her meal, Konoha spoke in a voice overcome with emotion.

Eat as much as you like. Feel free to have seconds. "I don't mind junk food, so that doesn't really bother me," I replied. "But I can see why living here would be tough for people who can't stand it."

The foods Konoha described were probably indicative of the Grakkan Empire's national character, or at least an indication of how differently they viewed food. The Empire's citizens tended not to care too much about culinary variety, and they weren't picky about flavor. It wasn't that they couldn't tell the difference between good and bad food, but it definitely seemed like they mostly viewed food as a means of replenishing nutrients, having long ago learned to accept it for what it was.

Elma, for example, ate the same thing every day. Even Mimi, who was on a journey in search of gourmet food, mostly stuck to the same menu as well. It was rare to find a person like me who ate something different every day. Tina and Wiska's meals varied a lot, but that was likely because they were dwarves. Dwarves didn't have the same eating habits regular Imperial citizens did, and they paid a lot more attention to what they ate. There was a reason that most chefs in the Empire were dwarves.

"Can't they just replace every automatic cooker in the Empire with this model?"

"Probably not; this cooker's pretty expensive."

When I told her the cost, Konoha sank deep into thought. "If I exhausted my savings, I could afford it… But it takes up a lot of space… Maybe I could go to Sir Kongou and suggest he acquire one for the Temple's cafeteria…?"

Konoha apparently envisioned installing a Steel Chef in her workplace. Hopefully that wolf priest, Kongou, agreed.

***

"Finally," said Konoha.

"They really took their time," I agreed.

We were in the *Black Lotus*'s dining hall, enjoying some tea. Two days had passed since her arrival. The Imperial Fleet had finished their preparations, and at last we'd set off. The *Black Lotus*—with the *Krishna* docked in its hangar—the Pirate-Hunting Unit, and the other mercenaries' ships were traveling together on a hyperlane.

"It has been a very leisurely few days," Kugi said, happily sipping on her tea.

Konoha, who sat next to her, asked in dissatisfaction, "Aren't we moving a little slowly?"

I'd thought that Kugi might have some sort of problem with Konoha, but based on my observations over the last two days, it didn't seem like it. *Maybe she was worried that Konoha might vie with her for her position as the shrine maiden Verthalz assigned to me? No, that doesn't sound right either. Well, whatever. I should answer Konoha's question.*

"We can't move much faster than this," I told her. "We're traveling not only with the Pirate-Hunting Unit, but also a significant number of mercenaries. As we do, they'll have to plan out supply lines carefully. We happen to have the *Black Lotus*, which has a high storage capacity, so we don't need to rely on the military resupplying us. But the other mercenaries don't have that luxury."

"Hm... I see. Supply lines... Food is important."

"I'm not just talking about food. But, well, food *is* important. It can sometimes lead people to rebel or desert. Even if things don't escalate to that point, bad-tasting food or an insufficient supply of daily necessities can affect morale. Low morale can lead to poor performance in battle. That's why I make sure to pay close attention to those matters. We're now in an age when we sail across a sea of stars, but in terms of things like this, it's not that different from when people relied on the wind to travel the seas."

That begged a question—had humanity really evolved? Had civilization actually advanced? However mentally mature we tried to be, as long as we remained human, we couldn't escape the three primitive desires.[1] Without food or water, we'd die, and that wasn't something we could change.

I shrugged. “Anyway, that just means our boring days will continue a bit longer.” Although we’d finally set off, it would still be a while before we had a chance to do anything. We were traveling with the Pirate-Hunting Unit, which had bolstered its numbers even further, and a large number of mercenaries were also accompanying us. Therefore, anyone observing us right now would see a swarm of combat ships, with most of those craft being official Imperial Fleet ships. No pirate would dare pick a fight with a group like this, which meant there wouldn’t be any enemy ambushes during our trip.

“I’d have preferred some action,” Elma said. “I can’t wait to try out the *Antlion*.”

“Getting excited about that is fine, but don’t screw up and take heavy damage.”

“I’m not an idiot,” she said, waving her hand dismissively as she returned to the lounge with the drink she’d come for. It had been a long time since Elma last sortied in her own ship, and that seemed to have reignited her fighting spirit. Hopefully that spirit wouldn’t fall flat on its face.

Well, I did triple-check, and nothing’s wrong with her ship this time, so she should be fine. She knows the Krishna*’s and* Black Lotus*’s fighting styles, and we did test runs using a simulator, so there shouldn’t be any problems coordinating. Testing coordination in an actual fight against pirates would be ideal, but unfortunately the current situation doesn’t allow for it.*

In case you were wondering, the *Antlion* was docked on the *Black Lotus*. A ship as large as the *Black Lotus* had a docking port that could be used by ships too large to fit in the hangar. It was typically employed to transport people and supplies.

“By the way, my lord, we are currently traveling through hyperspace, right?” Kugi asked.

“Yep,” I answered.

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“I guess not, huh?”

The *Black Lotus* had set off from the Wyndas Tertius colony about thirty minutes earlier, then synced FTL drives with the Pirate-

Hunting Unit and begun FTL travel. The fleet's ships had just synced their hyperdrives and entered a hyperlane, which we were currently traveling within. If we'd gone into the cockpit, we'd have seen the kaleidoscope of colors within the hyperlane, but that was honestly kind of headache-inducing, so I wouldn't recommend it. Wouldn't recommend it, *but*…

"Want to go see what hyperspace is like?" I asked.

Kugi's ears perked up. "Yes!" she answered with a radiant smile.

She's really curious… Is that because she grew up so sheltered?

"Want to come, Konoha?" I inquired.

Konoha's ears also perked up as she responded, "In this instance, I will join you."

Why is she radiating something like dutifulness—or perhaps fighting spirit? I wondered, puzzled, as we exited the dining hall.

Outside, we ran into Elma and Mimi relaxing in the lounge. Elma was working away at the beer she'd grabbed earlier, and Mimi was in a staring contest with her tablet. *Let me correct myself: Elma is relaxing, but Mimi isn't.*

"Mimi, make sure to take breaks when you get tired."

"Oh! Yes, of course! I'm almost done; just a bit more," she said with a smile, looking up from her tablet.

Elma waved dismissively, which I understood to mean "I'll keep an eye on her, don't worry."

Elma does seem to be drinking less than usual today, so I'll let her handle it.

"What was she doing?" Konoha asked.

"Probably going over the list of trade goods we bought," I replied. "This time, we mostly stocked alcohol and some kind of luxury product."

"Luxury product?" Kugi asked, puzzled. Having only joined us recently, there was a lot she didn't know.

I decided to explain. "The *Black Lotus* has lots of extra storage capacity. Even after we stock up on the things we need, there's plenty of room for extra cargo. So we fill up with trade goods to

earn a bit more cash, since it'd be a waste not to use our extra space. We're heading to an outermost region this time, and those regions tend to lack luxury products, so we should be able to sell them at quite the markup."

"I see. You'd make a good merchant, Sir Hiro."

"I know a bit about trading, but I've never taken part in it myself. I let Mimi handle all that, and if she makes a bit of profit, good. If not, I can cover any losses with money I make as a mercenary."

"I see...?" Kugi said, confused. Her expression was easy to read; she obviously wondered what the point was if Mimi didn't turn a profit.

"It's about experience. As Mimi gains experience, using my knowledge as a foundation, she'll eventually start making money. Actually, she's already begun. I can pretty much leave it completely to her these days."

"I see. I must devote myself until I too am worthy of a task from my lord."

"No pressure. On that topic, though—how have your copilot studies been going?"

"There's a lot to remember, and the role demands on-the-spot decision making. To tell you the truth, I am not confident."

"You won't be perfect right from the jump. Focus on remembering the terminology to start. I'll tell you when to activate different subsystems, so you'll only have to concern yourself with following my orders."

"Of course. I'll do my utmost to live up to your expectations," Kugi said, clenching her fists. Her fox ears stood up too.

When your ears are like that, you can't really hide what you're feeling. ...Cute. I do wish Kugi would relax a little more, though. "Even if you mess up, don't kick yourself; I'll find a way to cover for you."

"Yes, my lord."

Being diligent in one's work was a good thing, but it wasn't good to be so on edge all the time, since combat itself was extremely stressful. *Now that I think about it, combat doesn't really get me stressed out. Maybe because this still doesn't feel that real to me?*

Did the part of my brain that regulates fear go haywire when I came to this universe? As I pondered that, I turned to look at Konoha, who had silently listened to our conversation. For some reason, she looked disappointed. What aspect of our exchange merited that kind of reaction? I had no idea. *As I recall, she insisted on coming along with us because she wanted to observe Kugi. Are whatever personal concerns she had already resolved? Oh well…I'm not about to ask her directly.*

"Welcome, Master. Miss Kugi. Miss Konoha."

"We're going to barge in for a bit, Mei," I told her.

"Pardon the intrusion." Kugi and Konoha's greetings to Mei completely overlapped as they said the exact same thing in unison.

The *Black Lotus*'s bridge was essentially Mei's room. Her territory. You could also call it her castle. She was a Maidroid, and although she herself never called the bridge her personal space—nor would she ever—that was the shared consensus of the rest of the crew.

"I don't see it as intruding; you are welcome at any time. Are you here to observe hyperspace?"

"Yeah. Put it up on the main screen."

"Very well."

Hyperspace's kaleidoscopic colors projected onto the previously pitch-black main screen. The view was as psychedelic as usual, but today it was a tad different. Since we were traveling alongside numerous other ships, the jumbled primary colors were interspersed with the shapes of those vessels.

"Quite a lively display today."

"…"

Kugi and Konoha stared silently at the screen.

Hm? What's going on? They both seem to be staring at a single point, but…there's nothing there. No ships, no anything. "Did you two notice something interesting?"

"Not interesting, no."

"No. Not interesting in the slightest."

Although they denied it, they continued to stare. *Okay, so they don't find whatever they're looking at "interesting," but they* do *see something? I'm getting kind of freaked out.*

I asked Mei to look too, but she ultimately shook her head, seemingly unable to detect what they saw as well. The screen showed what the *Black Lotus*'s sensors detected, and Mei had full access to the data from those sensors. If she couldn't perceive anything unusual, then by rights, that should mean there was nothing unusual there.

"I'm satisfied."

"Agreed."

Kugi and Konoha looked away from the screen and walked over to Mei and I. It seemed as if they'd lost interest in hyperspace.

"O-oh, okay. Just what'd you two see?"

"Nothing worth mentioning, my lord," Kugi answered with a faint smile.

"No. It wasn't that interesting. Don't worry about it," Konoha agreed, shrugging.

I was a bit curious, but something told me that I shouldn't force the issue. It smelled like trouble.

"I see. So what should we do now? Have anything you want to ask Mei?"

"Oh... If it's not a problem, I'd like to ask Mei how she met you, and about everything that's happened since then," Kugi said.

"That does sound interesting. I would also like to know," said Konoha.

Mei began explaining how she'd first encountered me on a resort planet in the Cierra System.

I was sure that made for an interesting story for Kugi and Konoha...but all I'm going to say is that hearing Mei narrate the story from her perspective was extremely embarrassing. *Please stop. I'm not as amazing as you make me seem.*

***

Leaving the Wyndas System through gateways, we reached the frontier. Well, this region was called a frontier, but it was different from the border-area Tarmein System where I'd met Mimi and Elma.

"How is it different, my lord?" Kugi asked from the copilot seat.

We were in the cockpit of the *Krishna*. Since we were approaching the edge world, I figured it would be a good idea to be on standby in case we had to perform an emergency takeoff during FTL travel. As for Konoha, she was still in the *Black Lotus*. We were technically protecting her, so there was no reason to bring her aboard the *Krishna*.

"Ahead of us is the outermost region—also known as an edge world. Beyond that is unexplored space. Although we're in a frontier region, it's not one near national borders. Which means..."

"Which means...?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Ah ha ha... Brutally honest," Mimi said, wincing.

There was really no other way to put it. We *were* now in what was essentially the middle of nowhere, with nothing really worth seeing. This region wasn't of national strategic importance, nor had any particularly useful resources been discovered here. That also meant that there'd be no inhabitable planets here unless serious effort was put into terraforming, but that wouldn't happen unless the Empire somehow ran out of inhabitable planets at some point far in the future. This system—I believed its name was Bostok—was doomed to be an unattractive one in the boondocks.

Based on the system data I'd read, it wasn't like there were absolutely *no* resources out here. However, they were mostly metals and gases that could be found anywhere, so there was no particular reason to come out all this way to acquire them. If the development of the edge world continued, then it was possible the Bostok System would have a future as an intermediary region, but that was about it.

"To tell the truth, these types of systems are surprisingly good for pirate-hunting mercenaries."

"Is that so?" asked Kugi.

“We aren’t close to any national borders, and the local forces in systems like this generally lack numbers and quality. That makes it easier for pirates to operate. They’ll make their bases in unassuming systems like this and pillage surrounding systems.”

“I see.” Kugi nodded with great interest.

But although there’re lots of pirates to hunt, if your ship got damaged, repairing it would be a bit inconvenient. The Tarmein System was next to a national border, so the star system army and Imperial Fleet were both much stronger there; there would also be maintenance and munitions facilities. Colonies in the middle of nowhere, like this, had none of that. *Well, we’ve got the* Black Lotus *for times like this. We won’t have to worry about not being able to maintain the* Krishna.

The *Antlion* was a problem, however. If you wanted a mothership with a holding dock that could accommodate a medium ship, you had to acquire a capital ship. That’d be about the size of a large destroyer or small cruiser. Only a large mercenary group with a fleet of around ten small-to-medium ships could deploy a vessel that large. It was a bit too much for a group like ours, which only had one small and one medium ship.

“Are the outermost regions even emptier than here?” Kugi questioned me.

“Yeah. Actually, that’s not always true.”

“It’s not?” Mimi asked.

“We’ve yet to see what the situation’s like in the destination we’re headed to, so I can’t say anything for sure, but they must have facilities capable of hosting a fleet of our size. Merchants gather around places like that, since they tend to be safer. That’ll lead to mercenaries and explorers congregating, which in turn will lead even more merchants to gather there.”

“I see. That’s how trading colonies form?”

“Yeah, more or less. It probably hasn’t formed fully at this point, though.”

“In that case, how do the merchants make their transactions?”

“Probably using *that*. I won’t spoil the surprise, but look forward to it.”

I'd yet to see the Grakkan Empire's version of *that*, so I was anticipating it myself.

While we chatted, the fleet had reached the next hyperlane. This one would take us to our destination, and that would be a relatively short trip, so I decided to remain on standby in the *Krishna*. Mimi and Kugi continued studying how to use the ship's different subsystems. I listened in on their conversation, but didn't get involved. There were points when I could've offered pointers or more in-depth explanations, but it was important for them to learn those things themselves. I decided to intervene only if they'd obviously misunderstood something.

Looks like Kugi and Mimi are getting along well. Good. Mimi was guarded against her at first, so I was a little concerned, but from what I can see, they really are on good terms now. I'll have to continue to keep a close eye on them.

While I was lost in thought, a transmission from the bridge of the *Black Lotus* came in. It was from Mei. "Master, we will soon arrive at the destination."

"Got it. I doubt anything will be waiting for us, like that time with the crystal life-forms, but be on your guard just in case. Could you relay that to Elma too?"

"Understood."

Mei's transmission ended. Not long after, a notification arrived stating that the *Black Lotus* had exited the hyperlane and returned to normal space.

"We're here. No sign of an ambush," I muttered, analyzing the data the *Black Lotus*'s sensors had picked up on the console. At least for now, there were no signs of an ambush. Mei could probably analyze the contents of the FTL transmissions the hyperspace sensors picked up, which would let her reach a more informed conclusion, but a mere human like me wasn't capable of something like that.

The fleet reorganized itself, activating its FTL drives without incident. Then, as a group, we raced at faster-than-light speed toward the center of the system, as determined by the position of its sun.

“Hyperspace is a little too much. That makes it uncomfortable to look at. Still, the view during FTL travel is pretty nice. It’s beautiful.”

The gleaming stars formed lines as they flowed behind us. I couldn’t help finding this view lovely, however many times I witnessed it. The feeling of swimming among a sea of stars filled me with a sense of invincibility, of freedom.

“Hmm? I find hyperspace quite beautiful as well,” remarked Mimi.

“Mimi’s tastes can be really strange at times.”

“How mean,” Mimi said, dejected.

How to put it…? Mimi usually had pretty good common sense, but when it came to matters of taste…what she enjoyed differed vastly from what most people enjoyed.

“Oh. Looks like we’re about to arrive. Focus, focus.”

“Don’t think I don’t notice you forcibly changing the subject, Master Hiro. Let’s have a proper conversation about this later.”

“If we remember to.”

What we were about to see would likely be so shocking that we’d all completely forget about a small matter like this. Assuming that my guess was correct, anyway. *I’m counting on you, Grakkan Empire. Don’t let me down!*

“Five seconds until we exit FTL. Four, three, two, one… Now.”

The moment Mimi’s countdown finished, the *Black Lotus*’s sensor feed altered. We went from FTL travel to normal spaceflight, and the stars that had turned into streaks behind us reverted to dots.

“Wow… What is that?”

“It’s…quite large.”

After confirming that we’d returned to normal flight, I started switching between the *Black Lotus*’s external optical sensors until the main screen displayed a giant mass. It was an enormous multihull ship. A ship *that* big was naturally outside my realm of expertise, so I couldn’t tell at a glance who it’d been designed by, but it was the type of vessel I had expected to see. It didn’t look like

a new ship; in fact, going by the state of its exterior, it had seen significant use.

"That gigantic ship is called a military-use supply mothership. It can carry large amounts of supplies, equipment, and personnel. It's also a moving fortress that can maintain and resupply small ships, and even vessels as large as battleships."

Despite its great size, it should also be equipped with FTL capabilities and a method of interstellar travel. Given how large it was, though, keeping it on course when traveling within a star system was probably extremely difficult.

"It's even bigger than the colonist ships we saw in the Kormat System."

"Yeah. There were about five ships back then, though, so there should've been more people aboard those ships than there are on this one."

"Just how many people *are* on that ship?" Kugi asked, amazed. Mimi had seen colonist ships before, so she recovered relatively quickly, but Kugi was absolutely blown away. The way her mouth hung open a bit in shock was very cute.

"We'll probably use that ship as our base of operations for a while," I noted.

"I see."

The supply mothership's name…is Dauntless*. We'll be in its care for a while. Hopefully we adjust quickly.*

Chapter 3:
Supply Mothership Dauntless

THE GRAKKAN EMPIRE had only recently claimed the Kensan System as part of its territory. That system was actually discovered a long time ago, but the Empire had to take certain steps for a territorial claim to be recognized internationally—that is, by other galactic empires. Thus, the Kensan System was only recently incorporated into Imperial territory.

"By 'recently,' I mean about three months ago," I noted.

"That still counts as 'recently'?" Kugi asked, puzzled.

"I believe it does," Wiska told her.

On a national scale, something that had occurred three months ago counted as *very* recent.

"So what's our job here?" Tina asked. Rather than her usual jumpsuit-like work clothes, she wore comfortable loungewear. Not that there was anything wrong with that, since we were just chatting in the *Black Lotus*'s dining hall. *That said, all she has on is a tank top. Isn't that a little too skimpy?*

"The first order of business is reconnaissance and information gathering," Elma answered, sucking on the straw of...whatever she was drinking.

She always drank that after exercising, so I figured it was some protein drink, but I'd never actually checked. *Does it taste good? I'll have to ask later.*

"To be specific," she continued, "we're going to hunt pirates. As expected, there have been a lot of pirate attacks on transport ships and explorers in the region. The Imperial Fleet believes that pirates have set up a base in a neighboring system."

"To obtain information, mercenaries like us will split up and hunt as many pirates as we can. We'll need to either capture one alive or acquire a ship's data cache."

"I see..."

We'd only capture a pirate alive if they surrendered and ejected their cockpit. Pirates typically purged their cockpit data to

avoid betraying their friends; apparently even they had their own code of honor. But since they'd all die miserable deaths either way, they could at least provide us with something useful beforehand. If we couldn't acquire a data cache, we'd just have to interrogate a captured pirate. That would require a little more effort from the Imperial Fleet, but in a universe with technology this advanced, silence wasn't an effective way to maintain information security. And pirates basically had no human rights anyway. This universe *could* be really scary at times.

"So the usual, then," Tina said.

"Yup," I replied. Tina seemed satisfied with my answer.

Konoha had a question of her own, though. "Um…why is the Imperial Fleet leaving a task like this to mercenaries? Why don't they just do it themselves, considering how many ships they have here?"

"Supply mothership *Dauntless* has strong defenses, and can also unleash incredible firepower on stationary targets, but it's not suited to the high-speed dogfighting required to take down pirates. The Pirate-Hunting Unit has a number of ships capable of dealing with pirates, but not enough of them. Overall, the Imperial Fleet lacks the maneuverability needed to really get the job done. That's why they employ mercenaries, who tend to use high-speed, high-firepower small ships."

"I see… Is there a reason the Imperial Fleet hasn't tried to rectify this problem?"

"I couldn't say… In battles between nations, though, the bigger the better. Whoever has bigger ships and cannons and heavier shields wins. But they haven't got infinite resources, so they probably don't have the budget or personnel to equip a fleet of small ships too."

"Hmm… I see." Konoha didn't seem completely convinced, but she at least understood my reasoning.

It would've been better to ask Colonel Serena about stuff like this, rather than me. She was the rare military officer who'd chosen to assemble a fleet of small ships in an army dominated by big ships and big guns.

“I’ll explain the current situation based on the data we have so far,” I continued. “This is basically just what Colonel Serena sent me, though.”

First of all, there was no need to worry about protecting the supply mothership *Dauntless*. It was equipped with numerous defensive turrets and also housed a large fleet of interceptors. Since it was called a “supply” mothership, you might’ve assumed that it was weak in combat, yet it was essentially a mobile fortress.

Although the *Dauntless* itself was powerful, however, it couldn’t defend the entire star system by itself. The interceptors aboard were equipped with the basic functionalities all combat ships had, but they weren’t designed to operate far from the mothership. Receiving a distress signal required the *Dauntless* to send out other vessels, and before we arrived, its existing escort couldn’t handle such signals independently. That was why Serena and us mercenaries under her employ had been dispatched to the Kensan System.

Reports suggested that something was off about the pirates operating in this system. Their movements were too refined, and they seemed to prioritize their own safety over potential profit. Their ambushes were quick, and they always retreated before the star system army or Imperial Fleet had a chance to arrive. Then again, pirates weren’t stupid. If they couldn’t win, they’d run. We ourselves had run from countless battles.

“Maybe I’m just overthinking things, but it seems like quite a coincidence that just after obtaining the *Antlion*, we’re coming across pirates who are good at running away,” Wiska pointed out.

“I know what you mean. The *Antlion*’s gravity jammer is good against pirates in general, though,” I replied with a shrug. “Besides, we were going to run into pirates like this at some point.”

Even if we hadn’t taken on Colonel Serena’s request, we’d likely still have encountered pirates that made us muse about that. It really was to be expected. And there was nothing more suited to mercenaries like us than equipment that could prevent pirates from fleeing by disabling their FTL drives. *If you asked Kugi, she’d probably say something about my weird luck or destiny having caused this*

situation. But I don't really like the idea of destiny. As far as I'm concerned, I'm the one making my decisions, not some greater force.

"The bounties on the pirates here have gotten hefty. Let's proceed fearlessly, albeit prudently, and make some money… starting tomorrow. Today's for rest."

"My ship is good to go, thanks to Tina and Wiska. And we resupplied back in the Wyndas System. So how about we go check out the *Dauntless*?" Elma suggested.

"I like that idea!" Tina chimed in. "It looks like a pretty old ship, but I still wanna know what's inside it."

"Exploring a gigantic ship sounds fun," Kugi said.

"Would it be acceptable for me to accompany you?" asked Konoha.

"Of course!" Tina answered.

Tina and Kugi were on board with Elma's idea, and Konoha was clearly also interested, since she'd asked to join them. Kugi wasn't the only one with a strong sense of curiosity.

"Let's all go together, then," I said.

"Okay! I'll call Mei," said Mimi. She used her tablet to message the Maidroid, the only one not with us in person.

We had to make the best of this chance to blow off steam, since we likely wouldn't be able to do so for the foreseeable future. *Show us what you got,* Dauntless.

***

We stood out like a sore thumb; a party of seven beautiful women and one guy was bound to. To make matters worse, Mei was dressed in a maid uniform, and Kugi wore her shrine-maiden outfit. Konoha was garbed in a narrow-sleeved furisode and hakama with a curved, katana-like sword hanging from her waist. In short, a lot of things made our group eye-catching.

It wasn't like the *Dauntless* only had men aboard, but there did seem to be a slightly higher number of men than women. Most people wore military uniforms, so in any case, we really drew

attention—the others around us either wore uniforms or plain-but-durable shirts and pants.

“People are staring at us,” Kugi whispered.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Konoha told her.

Kugi and Konoha stood out the most within our group. Mei was also noticeable in her maid outfit, but Maidroids’ existence was common knowledge in the Grakkan Empire, so a lot of people had likely seen one before. Verthalz’s unique clothing, on the other hand, definitely didn’t blend in. Thus, people staring at the pair was, in many ways, unavoidable.

“This ship’s so nice! It puts me at ease,” Tina commented.

“The ceiling is low, like in a dwarven colony,” said Wiska. “And the weathered ambience reminds me of Vlad Prime.”

Tina and Wiska seemed to be enjoying themselves as they looked around like tourists. They were right that the ship had a low ceiling. Most colonies’ main residential districts had high ceilings to help lower the occupants’ stress. This was technically a military ship, though, so it had probably been created with more emphasis on spatial efficiency.

“It’s kind of funny how, although this is a ship, it even has a sightseeing guide.”

“It’s probably used a lot as a frontline base for edge worlds. It likely needed a guide to accommodate the merchants, mercenaries, and explorers who visit.”

The sightseeing guide was a lot simpler than the ones you’d find on normal colonies. It gave us basic information like where we could find restaurants, which districts of the ship were used for trading, and where the administrative areas were located.

“I didn’t expect a ship to have its own entertainment district.”

“Soldiers are still human,” Tina said. “They need a way to let off some steam.”

“This is practically a colony in and of itself. It’s probably safer than most colonies.”

“That’s true.”

Most colonies had slums, and sometimes even worse areas, but there was nothing like that aboard the *Dauntless*. That meant they maintained order in every corner of the ship. Whoever was in charge had to be pretty charismatic.

"How about we go shopping?"

"Let's do it. We might find something good. We can grab food afterward."

Having decided on our plans for the day, we headed to the trading district nearest to where the *Black Lotus* and the *Antlion* were docked. When we arrived, we saw a row of civilian-owned stores. This district appeared to be doing well, given how many people were here. A lot were dressed in mercenary garb, which meant that the mercenaries who'd arrived alongside us were probably shopping here as well.

"The military police are on alert."

"Well, a huge wave of outsiders just arrived. It's natural for them to be on guard."

Mercenaries had a reputation for being hot-tempered and running wild, and if an incident were to occur, it'd most likely happen in a crowded district like this. So the military wasn't wrong to be wary.

"Oh! Hiro, can we go to that store over there?" Wiska asked, tugging the sleeve of my jacket. I looked over and saw...a store with a bunch of junk on display. *Was* that a store? What did it sell?

"I don't mind, but what kind of store is that supposed to be?"

"It seems to offer artifacts brought back by explorers."

"Artifacts, eh?"

The so-called "artifacts" retrieved by explorers were supposedly traces of alien civilizations. It was true that explorer-type players in *Stella Online* made money by selling scan information and artifacts from unexplored planets, but I'd never experienced that side of the game at all, nor had I ever gone looking for information related to it. Everything I knew about it was superficial.

"I don't mind looking, but don't buy anything," Elma warned Wiska with a flat gaze. "I've heard stories about people getting sick due to loose quarantine restrictions."

“Really? That’s scary,” Mimi said, visibly recoiling.

That’s the first I’ve heard of something like that. Artifacts are *kind of scary.*

“The really scary things affect you mentally, rather than making you physically sick,” Elma added. “Remember that Singing Crystal? How it resonated directly in your brain rather than through your ears? Stuff like that.”

“I’m starting to get cold feet.” Although Wiska had brought up the idea of visiting the store, she’d been thoroughly terrified by Elma’s warnings.

Stores like this were rare, however, and only found around edge worlds, so we decided to check it out in case we found something interesting.

“Welcome.” A small man stood behind the counter within the cramped shop. He’d apparently replaced his eyes with cybernetic ones; two dimly glowing green lenses greeted us in place of eyeballs.

This store’s definitely fishy.

“This thing’s shape is so strange. What is it?” Tina mused.

“Hmm… I really can’t tell,” said Wiska. “But I can’t imagine that it’s anything other than an ornament.”

She and Tina were examining an artifact placed in a transparent showcase. Following their example, I glanced into the showcase as well. *Yeah. I understand what they mean. I really can’t tell what this is supposed to be.*

It was apparently some type of mortar-like container made of glossy white material. Being unable to tell what something was made of solely from its appearance was common in this universe, but the strange thing now was that the object seemed to be made from organic matter. Based simply on looks, one might assume it was a piece of white pottery, yet its material seemingly wasn’t inorganic. It was truly mysterious.

“Wow! Why is this shining?” Mimi asked.

“Who knows?” Elma responded. “It looks like some kind of green flame is flickering inside. Is this thing safe?”

“The energy it emits is quite weak,” Mei answered. “About the equivalent of one energy pack.”

“It’s kind of pretty.”

Mimi and the others were examining a deep-green jewel atop a gold pedestal. *One energy pack, eh? Then is it really an artifact, or is it just a forgery?*

“Kugi, Konoha, see anything interesting?”

“No, my lord. I haven’t seen anything with high potential.”

“I don’t sense any wares emitting thought waves either.”

“I see.” That meant we could rule out this shop having anything that had come from another world like I had, or anything that could have adverse mental effects. “Then it should be fine to buy anything that catches your fancy. I don’t hate mysterious decorative ornaments myself.”

“Now that you mention it, you *did* hang up a crystal life-form’s inactive core as a decoration.”

“It’s sparkly. I like it.”

The object in question had a faint iridescent glow even in pitch darkness. It was quite pretty. I’d sealed it inside a sturdy shield-protected case just for safety’s sake, since you never knew what might happen. I knew the core was inactive, but I still didn’t want to touch it with my bare hands.

“Hmm… I kind of want that. What do you think?” Wiska asked, pointing at something that looked like a twisted pyramid. It resembled a drill a little.

Tina immediately shut her down. “Where ya gonna put that? Get somethin’ smaller.”

What the heck is *that?* The object was made from some black metal with luminescent red lines running through it. It had a somewhat sacrilegious, ominous vibe, like a decoration you’d find in a demon lord’s castle.

We continued to window-shop, and in the end left without buying anything. I felt a little bad about that, but we weren’t about to purchase useless junk unless it really caught our fancy somehow. *In any case, there seem to be similar shops, so on to the next*.

***

After browsing through the fishy artifact stores, we headed to the *Dauntless*'s largest cafeteria.

"Is this the main mess hall? How exciting!" Mimi said.

The cafeteria was incredibly large, basically a gigantic food court. Automatic cookers were arranged along one wall. If you wanted something to eat, you were supposed to go over there and order, then eat at one of the tables in the room. The ceiling here was much higher than in the rest of the ship, producing a relaxed feeling. From the decorative plants and terrariums placed here and there, it was easy to tell that the designers had intended the cafeteria to help alleviate stress.

"I don't have high hopes for food provided by the military," Elma remarked.

"It can't be that bad. Combat ships may not have the best offerings, but supply motherships always go all out on long expeditions. The quality should be okay."

Combat ships only went on missions lasting a few days to a few weeks at most. Supply motherships, on the other hand, embarked on missions lasting from several months to several years. With that in mind, one *expected* them to put a bit more effort into their food quality.

Come to think of it, the taste and quality of the food provided at that official dinner meeting was pretty good. But the quality of what they usually eat is apparently pretty lackluster. For some reason, though, their tea is supposedly always good.

"Doesn't seem like there's any alcohol."

"It's still the day shift. That said, this *is* supposed to be a military cafeteria, so they might just not have any."

"I checked the guide, and there are apparently cafeterias and bars for civilians not too far from here."

"So that's where the booze's at?"

"You really enjoy your alcohol, Tina."

“It ain’t just me; Wis loves it too!”

“Even *I* wouldn’t start drinking at noon. Time, place, and occasion, Sis.”

The others in the group clustered around Tina and Wiska seemed to be enjoying themselves too. *Not just Kugi, but even Konoha, seem to be fitting in. Tina and Wiska are good at socializing.*

“Let’s order some things to eat, then regroup. As for seats… There are lots open, so no need to reserve any.”

The *Dauntless*’s arrival time, plus the time we’d spent looking around artifact shops, had caused us to arrive after lunchtime was already over, so the cafeteria had a number of empty seats. Or maybe there were just way too many tables. A lot were completely empty.

“You’re right. Let’s get to ordering, then!” Mimi said, grabbing my arm.

I glanced at Elma, who simply responded with a shrug and dismissive wave. I assumed I was supposed to take that as, “It’s fine, just go.”

As for the other group from my crew, the dwarf twins were leading Kugi and Konoha off in a different direction. Mei was with them, so I figured they’d be fine.

“There are so many automatic cookers here!”

“Are any of them produced by the manufacturers of the Steel Chef series? I doubt we’ll find an actual Steel Chef here.”

“They may not have the newest model, Steel Chef 5, but they might have a Steel Chef 4.”

“In any case, we eat food made by a Steel Chef every day. We might as well try something different for a change.”

“Yeah!”

Although these were all automatic cookers, automatic cookers weren’t interchangeable. The Steel Chef series consisted of high-end cookers focused on delivering an above-average version of everything they made. Some cookers were devoted to producing high-quality meat from food cartridges, while others specialized in creating sweets. There were even cookers that optimized how many

nutrients fit into a single bite. From automatic cookers with narrow specialties to those that were just plain weird, they came in many varieties.

"Oh—that one looks pretty good. It seems to specialize in fast food."

"That does sound good. Let's each order something different."

I'd found an automatic cooker that was optimal for food items resembling hotdogs, hamburgers, tacos, and pizza. We lined up to buy food there. Steel Chef cookers didn't produce fast food unless you outright requested it. *It's a bit strange to put it this way, but the Steel Chef always produces "proper" food. For me, it usually provides a main dish plus a few appetizers.*

The way the Steel Chef operated was mysterious. If you let it choose what to make, it would provide a different meal depending on who ordered. It supposedly analyzed how much you exercised, plus your brain waves during meals, to come up with the optimal meal plan—an unnecessarily high-tech automatic cooker.

I ordered what looked like a hotdog, while Mimi selected an item resembling a rolled taco. There was a "share menu" box that you could check while ordering to have the cooker slice your meal, making it easier to share with others. *How thoughtful.*

Food in hand, Mimi and I started wandering the cafeteria in search of the others. Before long, I heard Tina calling out to us. "Hey hon, over here!"

Looking over, I saw that she'd already secured seats for us and placed her meal on the table. I didn't see Mei, which meant she was likely procuring drinks for everyone.

"I told you so! Hiro ordered something he could share with everyone!" Wiska complained.

Tina defended her approach, pouting. "The food here's so different. I really wanted to try this!"

She had ordered a bowl of something that looked like curry udon. *I don't mind, but be careful eating that. If you get any on your clothes, it'll be a disaster. Oh, wait—given how good laundry machines are in this universe, I guess it might not matter.*

“Tina, you should get to eating,” I told her. “That dish isn’t as good once the noodles get soggy.”

“Soggy?”

“They absorb water, which makes them expand and get too soft. Hurry up and start eating them.”

“Hm…? You sure know lots about this strange food, hon. Oh—did you eat stuff like this where you come from?”

“I doubt it was the exact same thing. Also, be careful; you don’t want to get soup on your clothes.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s not a concern!”

She’s doomed. I pray you’ll have better luck in your next life, Tina’s clothes.

Kugi came over, showing me her selection with a happy smile. “Look, my lord. They had dishes from the Holy Verthalz Empire.”

Her food looked exactly like inarizushi. *Inarizushi and a fox… That’s a very nice combination, if I say so myself. I’m impressed that she found that. Wait, citizens of Verthalz eat inarizushi? The meal Konoha got from the Steel Chef was also a lot like Japanese food. So is their food culture like Japan’s? They might enjoy elven food.*

“This also comes from the Holy Verthalz Empire,” Konoha said, bringing over something that resembled onigiri. The color was a little different from what I was used to, likely because it had been made by an automatic cooker, but it was definitely onigiri. *I wonder what the filling is.*

“Looks delicious. The stuff Mimi and I brought over looked like safe bets too.”

“I chose dwarvenyaki,” Wiska said, as she tried something that looked like okonomiyaki. *The flavor’s practically the same as okonomiyaki as well.* Since Kugi had found something from her homeland, Wiska must’ve decided to follow suit.

“I got this.”

“A snack to go with alcohol?”

“They’re delicious; what’s the problem?”

Elma had chosen a large order of something similar to karaage. I wasn’t sure what kind of meat it contained—actually,

since it came out of an automatic cooker, it probably wasn't real meat—but it resembled chicken. *What about an entree? You really just got a ton of karaage by itself? You sure take things to an extreme.*

Mei brought over a plate with seven drink bottles on it, one per person. "Thank you for waiting."

Just where did she get those? "Everyone's here, so let's dig in. Nothing in particular to celebrate, but I propose a toast."

After everyone had grabbed their drink, I took the lead, raising mine up for the toast. The first to respond was Tina, the yellow color of her curry udon-like dish around her mouth. *She's quick when it comes to things like this.*

"Cheers!"

The food was pretty good. No one had any problems with the taste. Still, although the onigiri were quite popular, no one but Kugi and me seemed to take to inarizushi.

"It didn't taste bad; it just didn't really feel like a meal…"

"It doesn't really go well with alcohol."

"I think it'd be fine if we ate it by itself."

"It didn't really blend with the rest of what we ordered."

I had no problems with the inarizushi at all, but the others bashed it, which depressed Kugi a little. "I really like it…"

"I enjoy it too," I assured her. "But it might taste weird to people who aren't used to eating vinegared rice with sweet tofu."

"How unfortunate…" Kugi's ears drooped, and I felt a little bad for her. Still, this was a question of taste, which you couldn't really do anything about.

"This over here tastes fine."

"I'd say I like it. It's delicious."

"I feel like you could put a little more effort into it."

"Isn't the simplicity the selling point?"

The onigiri were well received; their simple flavor might've worked in their favor. The filling tasted similar to salted salmon, although it looked completely different.

"It is as I thought. Onigiri is the best."

“What’s with that smug look?”

Konoha gloated triumphantly over her choice, while Kugi had taken a blow, but overall everyone seemed quite satisfied with the quality of the food here. And Tina’s outfit, as I’d expected, had received an honorable death in battle.

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“Ugh! Those were my best clothes!”

“Trying to rub off the damage is only going to spread it, Sis…”

“Those noodles are pretty tough to eat safely.”

The soup from the curry-udon-like dish had stained Tina’s clothes, and she was now trying to wipe them clean, tears in her eyes. Wiska had a “the stuff I have to deal with” expression, while Konoha looked on in pity. Those stains really were hard to get rid of, although that probably wouldn’t be a problem for this universe’s washing machines. If worst came to worst, Tina could always go crying to Mei, who would probably be able to do something about it.

“Given the state of Tina’s clothes, shall we head back for the day?” Elma asked.

“Hmm… Okay,” I replied. “I wanted a chance to see what kind of entertainment they offer here, but there’s no need to rush. Let’s head back for today.”

We’d learned that there were stores that sold strange things here, and we’d familiarized ourselves with the giant food-court-style cafeteria. That was enough of a harvest for our first day. We’d naturally familiarize ourselves with more of the *Dauntless* over time; there was no need to rush, since we’d be here for a while.

“I snapped a picture of our dinner—look,” Mimi said, showing Kugi her tablet.

“Oh!” Kugi exclaimed, her eyes shining.

Mimi had been using her tablet to take photos of the food we ate. Whenever she ate something for the first time, she photographed it, recording it in her album. Today she’d added

images of Tina eating the “curry udon” and Kugi eating the “inarizushi” to her collection. Oh—she’d also taken a photo of Elma eating that mountain of “karaage.”

“Did you not take any pictures of my lord?”

“Master Hiro basically just ate normal fast food.”

Sorry. I stuck to something safe. I’ll pick something interesting next time.

We left the cafeteria and returned to the trade district.

“The atmosphere feels a bit…”

“Tense,” Elma finished.

As she said, the ambience in the trade district was uneasy. The reason for this was that heavily armed Imperial marines were strutting around. When we’d come by earlier, military police equipped with light combat armor and light laser rifles—perhaps more accurately referred to as laser carbines—were patrolling the area. However, even the most lightly equipped marines were equipped with standard military rifles and combat armor more suitable for battle. On top of that, over half were outfitted with power armor.

“A coup isn’t about to take place right after we arrived, is it?” I asked.

“Keep your mouth shut, hon.”

“Rude. Fortunately, it doesn’t look like that’s the case.”

Although the marines were heavily armed, their behavior wasn’t actively hostile, which meant a fight hadn’t broken out. *What the heck is going on, then?*

“Master, I believe we’d be wise to pass through as quickly as possible.”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here. Stick close; I don’t want anyone getting split from the group.”

I led the way, intending to make a path, but one of the soldiers spotted me immediately. “Excuse me. Are you Captain Hiro?”

“Oh… Yeah.”

The moment I stopped, it was over. *Clang. Clang.* I was immediately surrounded by a bunch of macho guys in power armor.

Actually, they might be girls*. Since they're wearing power armor, I can't tell. Wait—what're those shiny black things supposed to be?*

The marines had some kind of blunt, mace-like objects strapped to their waists. The implements appeared hastily made, but they still gave the soldiers a menacing vibe. With the physical strength power armor granted, a single blow from such a weapon would probably turn a human into paste.

"Looking for me?" I asked. "I don't recall doing anything that warrants this kind of behav—"

"You showed up at a very convenient time."

Before I could finish my sentence, Colonel Serena had appeared. *I want to run away... This definitely isn't something I want to get involved with.* "So...what business have you got with me?"

"We're currently conducting a search. We want to ensure that no dangerous artifacts are concealed in this district."

"I see. You have my condolences. Do your best."

"By 'dangerous artifacts,' I'm referring to the type of thing that appeared on Wyndas Tertius. You know where I'm going with this, right?"

I had hoped to cut the conversation short and get out of there, but Serena talked over me with a smile. And I knew *exactly* where she was going. I looked over at Konoha, who returned the look. This had to do with her as well, after all.

"Let me just say this now: I'd rather not fight one of those things without proper equipment," I told Serena.

"I imagine not. What was fighting them like? I reviewed the files provided on that, but I want to hear about the experience of someone who fought one for real."

"Are you asking what trying to slice through them felt like? They're pretty tough, but not as tough as superheavy metals. It felt like their plating is a bit weaker than a battleship's. They're unbelievably resistant to laser and plasma weapons, so it's probably better to use physical means to destroy them. I already told all that to the soldiers back on Wyndas Tertius."

"I see... Do you think these will be of use?" Serena asked, pointing to the crude maces the soldiers in power armor had

equipped.

“I think you could turn pretty much anything into scrap if you got a group of soldiers equipped with power armor to surround it and swing at it. Where’d you even get those weapons, anyway?”

“After those things’ remains were analyzed, these were provided to us as one of the immediately available countermeasures, since those things have physical resistance weaker than their resistance to laser or plasma weapons. In this era of intergalactic space travel, I never expected to have to equip my subordinates with metal sticks…”

Serena massaged her forehead as if nursing a headache, and the surrounding soldiers let out dry laughs.

Yeah, I can imagine. These days, soldiers are trained to fight with laser and plasma weapons. They must’ve been confused when they were suddenly handed a blunt weapon made of battleship plating or something. “Couldn’t they have made swords for the soldiers instead?” I asked, smacking the blades I wore strapped to my waist.

Serena shook her head. “You make it sound so easy. The swords we use are made with precious materials and cutting-edge technology. It might be possible to produce a few, or even a few dozen, but procuring hundreds or thousands is impossible. Besides, if someone hasn’t trained in swordplay, they won’t be able to wield a sword properly. That’s something you should understand all too well.”

“That’s true.”

The swords that nobles and I used were bladed weapons, which meant training was necessary to wield them properly. Although they were incredibly sharp, they could snap if you didn’t strike with the edge. If you smashed the middle of the blade against something hard, it could even shatter. At least, that was what I’d heard.

“In this age of laser and plasma weapons,” I said, “you generally don’t need to fight in close quarters. I guess that’s why you aren’t equipped with any standardized melee weapons?”

“Correct. You generally don’t need weapons with power armor either.”

That made sense. After all, if you flung someone around with the superhuman strength that bulky armor provided, they'd die. Being tackled by someone wearing that armor would be like getting hit by a car.

"That's all I know," I told her. "We'll be taking our leave now."

"Are you not going to help me?" Serena asked, smiling.

I answered her nonsense with a smile as well. "No."

You think I want to run into those metal killer spiders? You have to be crazy. I didn't have my ninja armor with me at the moment either, nor any other equipment. Even without such equipment, I could probably still have beaten one of those things, but I had no intention of taking that risk. If my beautiful skin got scratched, who'd make things right?

"Tch... Fine. I still expect you to help deal with pirates tomorrow. Be prepared."

"Aye aye, ma'am." I saluted, pretending not to have heard her click her tongue. *Did she really expect me to offer to help? My contract with her is limited to dealing with space pirates and matters involving combat in space. Sword fights with unidentified artifacts or aliens aren't covered.*

"Take care—"

Just as I was about to leave, red and green lights flashed in a section of the trading district—a section we happened to be near. The loud, explosive sound of a high-output laser making contact—and the unique heat wave plasma weapons produced when fired in enclosed spaces—accompanied the flashes of light.

"God damn it."

"Language, Captain Hiro."

"Pardon me."

Screams, and the sound of something being crushed, reverberated as a familiar-looking metal spider appeared from a store just ahead. There actually wasn't just one; there were three of them.

"God damn it."

"Language, Colonel Serena."

“Pardon me.”

I unsheathed the pair of swords at my waist. My contract didn’t cover this, but abandoning Serena at this point would go against my values. I couldn’t have slept properly with that on my conscience.

“Mei, Elma, please keep everyone safe. Mei, please assist as required.”

“Understood.”

“Sure.”

Hopefully I don’t actually have to do anything. Doesn’t look like I’ll be that lucky, though. What’re the odds of me first running into Colonel Serena, then having this *happen the moment I try to leave? My “destiny’s” power is twisting things again.*

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“Mei, you can offer support, but don’t put yourself in danger.”

As you’d expect, Orient Industries didn’t have a store out here in the outermost regions. Maintenance bots could handle basic upkeep, but if Mei suffered serious damage, repairing her would be difficult. Combat bots could probably be repaired, but Mei was a top-quality customized machine, so we had to be a bit more careful.

“Yes, Master.”

“I will take care of one of them,” Konoha said as she stood next to me, sliding her katana-like curved blade out of its sheath.

“In here, you can’t do what you did last time. The ship walls are weaker than a colony’s, and there’s also less room.”

“I know that,” Konoha said, unperturbed, as she began walking toward one of the spiders.

‹Kreeeeeeeee!›

“Gah!”

The first metal killer spider had unleashed what came off like a high-pitched telepathic screech as it began to thrash. Nearby marines frantically evaded its attacks, and although the soldiers in

power armor managed to hold it back, their laser and plasma weapons weren't doing much.

"Konoha said she'd take care of one of them for us," I told Colonel Serena. "But there's still one in the middle and one to the right, so which do you want?"

"Are you going to help?" Serena asked, looking at my unsheathed swords with her brows raised. She had unsheathed her sword too.

"I'd rather not, but I'm not so rotten that I'd abandon you and run away."

"I guess I should thank you."

Running away would also eliminate the trust I'd built with Colonel Serena, which wouldn't be good for my future as a mercenary. Trust was important for mercenaries. Losing that of major clients like Serena and the Imperial Fleet would be a serious blow. On the other hand, standing my ground here and lending assistance was an opportunity to increase that trust. All that meant that fleeing wasn't an option.

Most importantly, running away here would lead other mercenaries to look down on me. I'm not about to let them call me a chicken who runs away when it matters. But, well, if things look too bleak, I will *run. My reputation only matters if I'm still alive. Charging into unwinnable battles isn't courageous, it's reckless.*

"I'll distract it. Wait for an opportunity to strike a decisive blow with your maces!" I shouted as I charged toward one of the rampaging metal spiders. Since I wasn't even wearing combat armor, let alone power armor, the spider must've viewed me as easy prey. Or perhaps it saw the swords I wielded as a threat, because it turned and charged right at me.

"Whoa there!" At the last second, I dodged to the side.

The metal spider wasn't shockingly large, but it was still the size of a forklift or golf cart. It was also made of some unidentified metal, so it was likely much heavier than it looked. The day I took a direct charge from one would be the day all my bones broke.

‹Greeeeeeeee!›

Seemingly upset that I'd dodged its charge, the metal spider reared up on two of its six legs, then slashed at me with its other four arms—I mean legs. As I parried its slashes with the swords I wielded, I sank into thought. *If it has six legs, it's more an insect than a spider, right? Well, I guess that doesn't really matter. It's a bit tougher than I expected. Were they this strong last time? Oh, wait—I don't have power armor boosting my strength this time. That's probably why it feels stronger. Sorry, Colonel Serena. Forgot about that.*

‹Grooooooh!›

As the metal spider tilted, a loud metallic noise resounded. *Clank!* I wasn't sure what had happened, but I took advantage of the opening to run my blades across the spider's legs, cutting three off at the joints. *Hunh. The joints are pretty flimsy. I thought they'd be more like the bladed or plated sections.*

My attack was a bit too much for even these metal spiders to endure; the spider clearly wasn't sure what it should do now. It had to choose between focusing on the threat right before it, or avoiding the long-distance attack that had suddenly struck it out of nowhere. *The way it's struggling to decide really does make it seem alive. Kugi did claim they were living beings; I guess she might be right.*

‹Greeeaaaah!›

Clank! Another loud metallic sound reverberated as the spider toppled sideways, a black metal rod sticking out of its midsection. I looked in the direction the rod had come from and saw Mei holding a black metallic stake. *Oh, it was struck by Mei's throwing stakes. No wonder it fell.*

"Now!"

"Go, go, go!"

"Die, you monster!"

When the metal spider reeled sideways, the Imperial Fleet soldiers seized the opportunity to surround it and begin beating it with their crude maces. *Yeah, that's rough.* They broke off the spider's legs and quickly crushed its body into scrap. Ominous purple liquid leaked from its remains. *Surrounding an enemy and beating it with sticks is pretty effective.*



I looked over at Mei again and saw her preparing to throw another stake. Before I even had a chance to process that, the metal spider that Colonel Serena was fighting stumbled with a thunderous crash. *Yeah, if I got hit by one of those stakes, it'd pierce a huge hole right through me. Mei's freaking strong.*

"Ha!" Colonel Serena's sword bisected the front half of the metal spider, causing it to finally stop moving.

Did she really just cut through that thing's plating? Is she a gorilla? Brute force isn't enough to get through that, so I guess some kind of skill was involved.

"That was a good slash."

I looked toward some out-of-place clapping sounds to see Konoha sitting atop a fully bisected metal spider, applauding without a care in the world. She had already returned her sword to its sheath. *When did she finish her fight? Wait—why didn't I even hear anything from her fight?*

"They were much sturdier than I was led to believe, Captain Hiro," Colonel Serena said, walking toward me as she sheathed her sword.

"Their leg joint area was weak, but their blades and plating were tougher than I remembered. Sorry, I had power armor on last time I fought one. That must've thrown off my assessment."

"I see. Thank you for your help. Please thank that maid of yours for me as well."

"Will do. As for her..."

The two of us looked at Konoha. For her part, she simply cocked her head at us, confused.

"Isn't she a little too strong?" Colonel Serena whispered.

I whispered back, "Don't piss her off. She's powerful enough to crush everyone here at once."

"I can hear you, you know," Konoha said. She looked at us with deadpan eyes, her round ears twitching. Apparently, those weren't just there for show and had abilities matching their size.

"Ha ha ha ha! So what brings you here, Colonel? Isn't it a bit strange for a colonel to come on an inspection in person?" I asked,

attempting to forcibly change the topic.

Serena responded with an inexplicable facial expression. “On top of dealing with this area’s space pirates, we are also to investigate and deal with any threats to the public safety.”

“I see.”

Although dealing with the pirates here was apparently her main goal, it seemed Serena had also been tasked with handling issues related to the metal spiders. The matter with the spiders *was* why Konoha had come with us.

“I’ll more than earn my keep dealing with the pirates, so if possible, could you leave me out of these types of incidents?” I requested.

“Forget that,” Serena replied. “As long as Lady Konoha is with you, you’ll be involved.”

“God damn it.”

“Language, Captain Hiro.”

I didn’t bother apologizing. This meant my fate had been sealed the instant I decided to let Konoha travel with us. *Is it too late to return this tanuki girl? It is? Darn.*

Even if Konoha hadn’t been with us, Colonel Serena was still our employer, which gave her the authority to order us around. As long as she used that authority to place us in locations where events involving the metal spiders were likely to occur, we’d still get dragged into work related to them. We’d been screwed from the start.

“Master.”

“Oh, Mei. Good job supporting us. Are you okay?”

Driving my upsetting conclusion from my mind, I instead praised Mei for her impeccable long-range support. She seemed fine, but given the intensity of the attacks she’d unleashed, she must’ve exerted herself, which worried me.

“I’m fine. Thank you for feeling concerned. Are you injured, Master?”

“Not a scratch, but that’s enough work for today. Let’s head back to the ship and relax.”

“Yes.”

Mei and I regrouped with Mimi, Elma, and the others, collected Konoha—who had been inspecting the metal spider she’d bisected—and returned to the ship. *This was just our first day here, and so much happened. I’m worried about the future…*

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We parted with Colonel Serena, returned to the *Black Lotus*, and dispersed. Today—at least until 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning, according to the *Dauntless*’s ship time—was personal free time.

Although Mei had only supported us from a distance, she’d still participated in battle. So, just to be safe, she decided to spend the period in the maintenance pod within the cockpit, which had half-turned into her personal quarters.

“What are you going to do, Master Hiro?”

“Me? I was thinking of looking over the Kensan System’s map to plan tomorrow’s strategy.”

“Look at you, always so hardworking. I’m going to drink.”

“I’ll join you!”

“It’s still daytime, Sis.”

“Who cares?! We’re gonna be busy tomorrow!”

“When you’ve got time off, it’s best to relax to the fullest,” Elma said. “Want to join us, Wiska? I’ll bring out something I’ve been saving.”

The two drunkards began to cajole Wiska into joining them. It was two against one, so Wiska wouldn’t last long. The drunken trio was forming once more.

“What’re your plans, Mimi?”

“Hmm… Can I join you, Master Hiro?”

“Sure. Kugi, what about you?”

“Kugi is with us,” Elma declared.

“Yeah, join us! You too, Kono*hon*!”

“Huh? I have other plans—how are you so strong?!”

“Hey. Don’t force them if they don’t want to drink.”

In the end, the drunkards dragged Kugi and Konoha away with them. *Is Kugi even allowed to drink…? Well, hopefully they don’t do anything too crazy… So dwarves are strong enough to overpower Konoha? That’s unexpected. Does her strength come from some psionic ability?* “Mei, sorry to interrupt while you’re undergoing maintenance, but could you keep tabs on them?”

“Yes, Master.”

Even while undergoing maintenance, Mei could monitor the rest of the *Black Lotus*. As long as Mei watched out for her, Kugi should be fine.

“Let’s get started,” I told Mimi.

“Okay!”

We sat down on the sofa in the lounge and activated the holographic display.

“In normal systems, you’d look at where colonies are, find asteroids that are easy to hide by, and then look at what routes merchant and prospector ships follow. But edge worlds are a bit simpler than that.”

“I see.”

I marked the *Dauntless*’s position. “This is the *Dauntless*. And the hyperspace entrances to the Kensan System are here, here, and here.”

“Right.”

One entrance connected to the Grakkan Empire’s frontier region; the other two connected to unexplored star systems.

“These three routes are the main ones,” I said, drawing lines on the system map to connect the *Dauntless* to the three hyperspace entrances. Merchant ships typically traveled on the line connected to the frontier region’s hyperspace entrance. On the *Dauntless*, adventurers and explorers offloaded what they found in unexplored systems. Since there weren’t any other colony-type outposts in the system, that was the only place for merchants to either stock up on supplies or offload wares.

Explorers used the routes leading to unexplored systems as they headed to “work.” They went to unexplored systems, then brought back mapping data and information on resources they’d discovered, which the Grakkan Empire purchased. There were also those who would land on a planet and explore the surface in search of artifacts and other things of note. Although people called the objects they found “artifacts,” most turned out to be nothing more than strangely shaped rocks or other things of little practical value. Real relics of alien civilizations created by alien technology were rare. I’d heard that if you actually found one, it would go for a ridiculous price.

“Do pirates attack explorers?” Mimi asked.

“If they can’t find any other prey, or the other prey is too hard to go after, then they’ll attack explorers. But explorers tend to use ships that are much more heavily armed than the transport ships merchants use, so it’s usually risky for pirates to attack them. Explorers frequent regions that aren’t protected by the Imperial Fleet or a system army, so they’re prepared to defend themselves.”

They sometimes even had to fight space monsters, and many explorers were much better equipped and more skillful than newbie mercenaries.

“Still, there are pirates in the outermost regions who target explorers to steal their equipment for themselves. The caliber of pirates in the outermost regions is significantly higher than that of the pirates we’ve fought, so we need to be careful.”

“That makes sense. You also said that we had to be careful about enemy reinforcements, right?”

“Oh, you remembered? That’s right. Even if a fight drags on, it’s unlikely that the Imperial Fleet or system army will arrive to assist you. That’s why, when pirates here encounter a strong enemy, they’ll sometimes call for help and use sheer numbers to take down their prey.”

In star systems with a high security level, the Imperial Fleet and system army would quickly arrive and round up all the pirates. That wouldn’t happen in the outermost regions, though.

“That makes fighting pirates here much more dangerous, right?”

“If we were the only ones here, then it would. But we came along with Colonel Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit and all those other mercenaries, so we don’t really need to worry about being overwhelmed with numbers.”

“I see. With that in mind, how should we operate?”

“We’d usually camp near the asteroid belt and use the *Black Lotus* as bait, but I think setting up a net near one of the hyperspace entrances could work here,” I said. I marked an area at one of the hyperspace entrances connected to an unexplored system. “We can pretend that we ran into a problem with our hyperdrive, baiting pirates to attack us. Once they show up, we’ll deploy from the *Black Lotus* and take them out.”

“The peek-a-boo strategy.”

“I like it. Yeah, the peek-a-boo strategy. If they try to run away, we have the *Antlion* to stop them.”

If a big wave of pirate reinforcements arrived before ally support showed up, that encounter might get sketchy. Still, given how much firepower both the *Krishna* and the *Black Lotus* possessed, it should work out somehow. *That said, if the pirates are carrying anti-ship reactive torpedoes, those would pose a real risk to the* Black Lotus. *I’ll have to tell Mei to be on guard.* But while the pirates here were better than in other systems, it still wasn’t likely that they could score a torpedo hit on the *Black Lotus* in a frontal assault.

“What would you do, Mimi?”

“Me? Um…” She placed her hand on her cheek and sank deep into thought.

Spending time mulling over how to defeat pirates was necessary to level up as an operator and as a mercenary in general. This was a good opportunity for Mimi to gain some experience. I spent the rest of the day scrutinizing the system map with her, occasionally hearing Elma and the others enjoying themselves in the other room.

Chapter 4:
Hunting Pirates in the Outermost Region

THE NEXT DAY, we finished our normal morning routines and then set out from the *Dauntless*.

“I’m glad the booze is out of your system,” I told Kugi.

“My apologies about that…” she responded.

Sitting in the copilot’s seat, Kugi was lethargic. She had joined a bunch of drunkards yesterday, and before long, she’d been out cold. She’d slept all the way until morning, whereupon she was assailed by a terrible hangover.

Kugi was usually the first one up in the morning, and since she hadn’t left her room, Mimi went to check on her. She’d found Kugi lying on her bed, groaning. Mimi had somehow helped her to the medical pod, which was where Kugi spent the rest of the morning.

“I never want to drink alcohol again.”

“I’m glad that I’ve finally met someone else with a low tolerance.”

Mimi couldn’t drink much either, but she could still drink *normally*—whereas Kugi, like me, had an extremely low tolerance. That was great news, since I’d begun feeling a bit self-conscious about the trait. At some point, I’d need to find a way to drag her down the rabbit hole of carbonated drinks. As for Konoha, her drinking ability was apparently on par with the dwarf sisters’. She’d been the first one up this morning, and she showed no sign of a hangover. *Hardy.*

Konoha was currently staying in the *Black Lotus*. She was technically a VIP from a foreign nation and someone we needed to protect, so although we were only facing space pirates, I originally hadn’t wanted to bring her along at all. However…

“As a military officer of the Holy Verthalz Empire,” she’d stated, “part of my duties is to observe other countries’ military affairs to the best of my ability. Do not worry; in the unlikely event that space pirates board this ship, I will assist you.”

…She'd refused to leave. I was incapable of forcibly evicting her, so I'd just let her be.

"So what's our plan today?" Elma asked through my receiver.

I'd already finalized the plans yesterday with Mimi. "The route between the Tescalope System hyperlane exit and the *Dauntless* is near the asteroid belt. We'll going to set up our usual ambush strategy there. We'll have the *Antlion* power down and position itself in the shadow of an asteroid, and once the pirates fall for the trap, we'll launch the *Krishna* from the *Black Lotus*. When the time is right, I want you to activate the gravity jammer and join the battle."

"Got it," Elma answered with a nod.

The Tescalope System was one of two unexplored systems neighboring the Kensan System. It had yet to be fully explored, but a gas planet that could potentially be mined for useful gaseous resources had been discovered already. The systems even farther out had already been named, but they were still being sought out.

"Master, we have received permission to launch. Prepare for takeoff."

"Got it. Fly safely."

It was best to be cautious; other mercenaries were setting out too, and someone might be clumsy enough to run into us. *If somebody did, the* Black Lotus *isn't really the ship I'd be worried about, given its plating and shields…*

"Mei, I'll send you the coordinates for our destination."

"Understood, Miss Mimi. Thank you."

During Mei and Mimi's exchange, I checked on the *Krishna*'s condition. It wasn't that I doubted Tina and Wiska's work; I just believed that it was best to double-check anyway. Getting lazy and just assuming that the two had done a good job, so there was nothing to worry about, could lead to unexpected curveballs.

"Kugi, let's run a last-minute preflight check."

"Yes, my lord."

I displayed the ship information on the main screen and started the checklist program. Then the two of us went through the list, making sure everything was in order. This was part of copilot

training. There were a lot of things to check off, but the copilot had to pay extra attention to the chaff systems, flare systems, emergency cooling device, shield cells, and the generator's energy distribution. When checking subsystems, they also needed to establish whether those systems were fully loaded with ammunition. If possible, they should also check the remaining ammo of projectile weaponry and each thruster's functionality.

"Of course, I'll check as well," I said, "and so will Tina and Wiska, before I do. But you can't be lazy about stuff like this. In the unlikely event that there really is a problem with a subsystem, generator, or thruster, not catching it in time could cost you your life."

"Yes, my lord."

If your weapons malfunctioned, you could still escape combat as long as your subsystems and suspension systems worked. However, you couldn't say you'd survive the reverse situation. Subsystems were generally defense mechanisms used in moments of danger; a subsystem failing to activate could easily lead to fatal consequences.

I explained these details to Kugi, who nodded in understanding. Sitting next to her, Mimi also nodded. Operators understood such matters all too well. Everyone in the cockpit carried out this type of basic system check over and over. Since it was a matter of life and death, the time spent wasn't a concern. However many checks had already been done, there was still no harm in conducting more. As we ran through our list, the *Black Lotus* took off with the *Antlion*—which Elma was piloting—stationed aboard.

"Master, I will now begin navigating to the specified coordinates."

"Got it. As usual, set the passive radar to the highest sensitivity, and if you happen to pick up any distress calls, prioritize them."

"Aye aye, sir."

The most active form of pirate-hunting I used was "fishing," but if someone out there was already in the middle of fighting pirates, it would be more efficient to track those pirates down

instead. We could go fishing anytime, but a chance-encounter distress call was a one-off; there was no reason to let it pass by.

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It happened just when we were about to arrive at our destination.

“Master, we have received a distress call. The sender handle is ‘Screech Owls.’ It appears to belong to a group of explorers.”

“Oh. And we were just arriving too. Okay, steer toward them instead.”

“Understood. We will arrive in roughly 120 seconds.”

“You heard her. Ready?”

“Aye, sir,” Elma answered. “This will be the *Antlion*’s first battle. Time to shine.”

“Yeah. Just make sure you don’t shine in a bad way,” I told her, then looked over at Mimi and Kugi. This would be Kugi’s first real battle as well, and she seemed pretty nervous, but Mimi was calm.

“Switch generators to combat mode. Activate weapon systems.”

“Okay. Generators switched to combat mode. Activating weapon systems.” Following my instructions, Kugi began to meticulously activate subsystems.

Good. She isn’t going very fast, but her movements are precise. I’m not asking her to do anything too complicated, but being thorough is a plus. Speed will come with experience.

“Mimi, order risk assessment based on firepower.”

“Understood!”

With the *Antlion* around, there wasn’t much need to worry about faster ships escaping us. And being able to assess a ship’s threat level based on its firepower made things nice and easy.

“We will soon enter combat,” Mei reported. “I plan to launch the *Krishna* immediately. That’s what you want, correct?”

“Of course.” As I answered Mei, the *Black Lotus* returned to normal space, a thunderous sound echoing through it.

“Opening back hatch. Activating catapult. Launching.”

“Okay. Here we go!”

“Yes, sir!”

At the same moment Mimi and Kugi responded, the electromagnetic catapult activated, launching the *Krishna* from the *Black Lotus*’s hangar into space. *It’s been a while, so my trigger finger’s itchy. Time to let loose.*

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“This is the *Krishna* of the mercenary guild. We’re here to assist. Hang in there.”

“You’re a lifesaver!” came the reply. “Damn it. These guys are persistent!”

The moment we left the hangar, I’d begun steering, heading toward the area of combat. At a glance, the group under attack consisted of two medium ships and…three or four small ships? The fight had turned into a brawl, so it was hard to tell.

“Master Hiro, I’ve received signals differentiating friend and foe. I’ll display them onscreen.”

“Got it.”

At that point, green frames began highlighting the ships belonging to the group of explorers, indicating that they were allies. Red frames highlighted all the other ships, indicating that they were enemies.

“Let’s cut the enemies’ numbers down a bit and pull some of them toward us. Elma, lend us support. I’ll leave timing the gravity jammer to you. Oh, and if you notice any ships you can take care of, feel free to. We’re pretty much guaranteed to turn a profit, and we don’t need to worry about resupplying, so no need to hold back.”

“Aye aye, sir. I’ve been waiting for this!” Elma answered, moving away from the *Krishna*. I was planning to charge straight in, but it seemed that she’d decided to loop around behind. She

probably intended to bring down any pirates that began to flee the battlefield when they witnessed the *Krishna*'s firepower.

"There are a lot of the small guys," I noted. "*Black Lotus*, join the attack. Be careful of any ships wielding torpedoes."

"Yes, Master."

The *Black Lotus* had significantly more firepower than the *Krishna*. That didn't mean that it could take on a combat ship of equal rank; still, it could dominate small ships a rank below. In situations like this, it was best to have the *Black Lotus* enter battle to help eliminate the enemy faster.

"We are entering combat range, my lord."

It would be a bit longer before the *Antlion* or the *Black Lotus* could participate, so it was time for the *Krishna* to put on a show.

"Okay. We're moving right in!"

I charged onto the battlefield, where both parties' small ships were locked in combat. Before long, I noticed that one of the explorers' small craft was in dire straits. Three pirate ships had surrounded it, and it was eating concentrated fire. It could go down at any moment, so I decided to help it first.

"Hah!"

"Whoa!"

"Huh?!"

"Eep!"

"Wah!"

Not slowing down at all, I'd slammed the *Krishna* right into one of the three small ships firing laser cannons into the rear of the explorer vessel. As I did so, I fired my heavy laser cannons and flak cannons at another ship. I'd caught not only the pirates by surprise, but also Mimi and Kugi, who cried out. *Come to think of it, this might be the first time I've done something this aggressive around them.*

"Activate a shield cell, Kugi. Mimi, focus."

"Y-yeth!" Mimi yelped.

"U-understood!" Kugi said.

Although panicked, the two acted according to my instructions. The *Krishna's* impact had completely depleted one pirate ship's shields, leaving it half destroyed and out of commission, while the pirate ship that had taken the *Krishna*'s full cannon onslaught was barely holding on. The remaining pirate ship was trying to flee, so I decided to chase it, firing heavy lasers at its rear. The *Krishna*'s shields were pretty low from ramming a ship as well, but they were swiftly recovering, and the endangered explorer ship had seemingly managed to reactivate its shields. Just when I was about to finish off the pirate ship in front of me, something flew past and stabbed its flank, blowing it up.

"Sorry—I thought it was going to run away, so I shot some missiles at it."

"Don't sweat it. Keep it up."

Elma had apparently launched seeker missiles from the *Antlion* earlier in the battle. Not even she could've predicted that I'd ram one of the ships in order to knock them out. Anything I hadn't revealed to Mimi, I hadn't revealed to Elma either.

"There are plenty of targets left. Let's clean them all up."

As the pirates continued to focus on attacking the explorers, we began to hunt them down one after another. Although their ship specs were better than those of other regions' pirates, they were still mostly hybrid vessels composed of salvaged parts jury-rigged together. Once their shields were down, the ships fell apart.

"God damn it! Are the others still not here?!" a pirate exclaimed over the comms.

"You'll probably all be dead before any reinforcements arrive," I told him.

"You cocky bastard!"

The pirates started to focus their attacks on the *Krishna*. *Oh, no, honored guests. You mustn't. Really, you mustn't. If you focus on me, you're completely screwed.*

"An alert? Wha—?!"

"Gah! Where the hell did that come from?!"

"Ahh! Stop! Sto—!"

A barrage of seeker missiles and laser cannons flew past the *Krishna* into the pirates, causing a gigantic explosion.

“Enemies wiped out.”

As I strung the pirate ships along, the *Black Lotus* had arrived in the combat zone and basically swept the pirates in a broadside volley. *Yeah, bigger ships sure have a lot of firepower.*

“Master Hiro, unidentified ships are approaching this area. It won’t be long before they warp into the combat zone.”

“Got it. They’re probably enemy reinforcements, so prepare to enter combat at any time.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Okay!”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Boom! With a thundering roar, multiple ships warped into the area. Each was unique in its own way, and they were all adorned with offensive, yet seemingly superfluous, ornaments. Skulls and crossbones were also painted on top of the hulls for some reason. *Yeah, the long and short of it is that these guys are definitely pirates.* There were only five of them.

“Don’t let them get away, Elma.”

“Who do you think I am? Activating gravity jammer.”

A deep bass sound echoed, resonating in the pit of my stomach. There weren’t any other noticeable occurrences, but something *did* seemingly interrupt the pirates’ FTL drive activations. Their activation switches evidently went dark, indicating that they weren’t usable, and their safety locks triggered.

“Wh-what?!” a pirate cried. “I can’t activate FTL!”

“My safety lock won’t turn off! Argh—bastard! Stay away from me!”

“Ha ha ha! Just where do you think you’re going?” I jeered.

The pirate ships scattered in all directions, but I managed to tail them and take them down one by one. My crew ultimately shot down four ships, while the explorers brought down one.

“Ha ha! We did it! Screw those miserable pieces of trash!”

“We-we’re alive…I thought we were goners.”

The explorers were fluctuating between excitement and relief. As for us, it was about time to start on what really mattered.

“Okay, *Black Lotus*. Start collecting the spoils. The *Krishna* and *Antlion* will stand guard and monitor the area.”

“Understood.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

We quickly got to work. *I kind of hope more pirates show up… Oh, right. I can’t just forget the explorers.*

“Let me reintroduce myself,” I told them. “I’m Captain Hiro, a mercenary affiliated with the mercenary guild. I believe you guys are called…Screech Owls?”

I received a response from one of the two medium ships. It was a man’s voice; an older man. “Yeah, that’s right. Thanks for helping us. I’m Captain Souls, and I represent the group. But in terms of payment for rescuing us, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until we return to the *Dauntless*.”

“That’s fine with me. We managed to arrive in time—you guys are pretty lucky.”

“What was ‘lucky’ about being attacked by those pieces of trash? We were fortunate that you guys showed up, though.”

Captain Souls was clearly upset about the attack. The small ship that the pirates had focused on attacking was barely limping along, and it wouldn’t be cheap to repair. *Still, that’s not my problem. Sucks to be you.*

“Well, you should do your best to make some money back,” I suggested. “The ships you destroyed belong to you, and we won’t charge you for an escort back to the *Dauntless*.”

“Your kindness is bringing this old man to tears. Let’s do it.” He began addressing someone else. “Hey—get the recovery drones moving! And hurry up and hook Hector’s ship before it falls apart!”

The explorers began to clean up their side of the battlefield, so it was time for us to focus on our side again. Not that Elma and I would join in—we had to stand guard.

***

Another mercenary group showed up later, but when they saw that all the pirates had already been taken care of, they quickly left. There was nothing strange about that, and we'd have done the same in their shoes. First come, first served.

"I see. You got caught in the asteroid belt, and it forced you out of FTL travel?"

"Well, yes. That's not quite right either, though. I didn't screw up—this system's map just isn't very accurate, you see."

Mimi was listening to the Screech Owls' operator complain, although she wasn't really paying attention. The operator seemed over the moon at the opportunity to talk with a young girl.

I'm not giving her to you. She's mine. "Tina, are we almost done collecting our spoils?"

"Will be soon. You were right, hon—the parts they're using ain't bad quality, but they ain't been properly maintained."

"However good their equipment is, it doesn't matter if they didn't take care of it properly..."

"The problem is, unless we fix up the parts we recovered ourselves, they won't go for anywhere near market price," Elma noted. "There probably won't be much demand in the first place either."

"Probably not." I agreed with her completely.

The pirates' equipment was pretty good—it consisted of luxury products compared even to properly maintained pirate equipment in other systems—but these salvaged parts still wouldn't be adequate for mercenaries willing to come to the outermost regions, and the explorers here had comparable equipment already. As for the civilian transport ships that came to trade with the *Dauntless*, they had no use for this kind of equipment to begin with. *Well, if they have extra space, I guess they might be willing to load up some of this junk as long as it's high-enough quality, even if it wasn't properly maintained. That's about it, though.*

"Nope. These won't sell well," Tina was on the same page.

“We could always fix these parts ourselves, though, then bring them somewhere else we could sell them.”

“I’ll leave that for you to decide, hon. For now, we’ll do our best to polish up all this borderline-junk equipment. You don’t need us to patch a ship together this time, do ya?”

“No. No point. Nobody around here will be interested in buying a ship.”

Unless there were special circumstances that significantly increased demand for *any* ship capable of short-distance transportation, it was pretty hard to sell a hybrid ship made of pirate salvage. That kind of ship could transport things, but installing weapons systems and subsystems aboard took a lot of work. It was possible to crudely graft weapons to the vessel, but those wouldn’t be reliable. Glitches could occur and prevent the use of weapons at critical moments or keep subsystems from activating. Ships with such defects couldn’t cut it as combat or explorer craft. That was why only pirates and newbie merchants used hybrid ships, which greatly affected their price.

We were in the Kensan System, which wasn’t a place where you’d find newbie merchants. Any merchants operating here would either have guards, or be heavily armed themselves, like the explorer group we’d just rescued. Besides merchants, mercenaries, and explorers, the only people you’d find out here were military personnel, and the military had no use for slapped-together hybrid ships.

“Got it. We’ll be done cleaning up soon.”

“Okay. Contact us then.”

I ended the transmission to Tina and the others and looked over at the copilot seat beside me. Kugi sat there in a meditative state, eyes closed. Although she looked as if she were sleeping, she wasn’t; the ears atop her head twitched. *Watching them move like that makes me want to reach out and touch them. What’s she doing, anyway? Visualizing stuff?*

Lost in thought as I stared at Kugi’s ears, I suddenly locked eyes with Mimi, whose head had popped up behind Kugi. She’d apparently finished her call with the explorers’ operator. Mimi also seemed curious about Kugi’s ears, so I decided to play a prank.

Moving slowly so as not to attract Kugi's attention, I approached her and blew softly on her ears.

"Hyaaan!" Kugi let out a scream I'd never heard from her before, shaking her head back and forth. Her ears must've been really ticklish. Still rubbing them, she looked over at me with a flushed face. "M-my lord?"

"Sorry. The way your ears were twitching was just too cute. I let my impulses get the better of me."

"Me too!" exclaimed Mimi. "I want to try blowing on them too!"

"N-no! Please don't! My ears are really sensitive!" Kugi timidly but resolutely refused to let Mimi get closer.

Your ears are hands-off, but what about your tails?

I reached toward one of Kugi's tails, but it immediately flicked away. I had thought that Mimi was distracting her, but she reacted to my hand with superhuman speed.

"My tails are too...!" Kugi protested. "Oh...my lord... If you truly wish to, then..." She presented her tail to me, continuing to hold Mimi off.

"Oh. No... Sorry," I apologized. "If it makes you uncomfortable, I don't want to." I hadn't realized that it was such a big deal for her. I shouldn't have tried touching it. "So your ears and tails are very sensitive body parts?"

"S-sensitive...? Well, yes, they are a bit sensitive... It sends shivers through me when they're touched."

"I'd still like to try touching them sometime, if possible. They look so fluffy and inviting, it makes me curious."

"Me too! I want to touch them too!" Mimi cried.

"I-if you wish, then once we have some free time..."

It seemed Kugi would let me try touching them at some point. Nice. But I wasn't sure whether she realized that she'd now technically promised to let Mimi do so too. *Don't be too disappointed if she ends up refusing you, Mimi.*

"Once we're finished cleaning up the battlefield, we'll escort these people back to the *Dauntless*," I declared. Providing that type of service afterward was important.



If Tina and the others successfully acquired data caches from the pirate ships, we could have Mei analyze them. Depending what she found, we might not have to set out again. Useful information that we might learn included ambush spots, locations the pirates used to regroup, and even the coordinates of their base. Such information would open up much more efficient avenues for hunting pirates.

"Got it!"

"Yes, my lord!"

It didn't seem like any more pirates would show up at this point, so all we could do for now was wait. It would've been awesome if pirates just served themselves on a platter, coming one after another, but unfortunately things usually didn't work that way.

***

After we'd escorted the Screech Owls back to the *Dauntless*, we decided to contact Colonel Serena.

Her vexed voice reverberated through the *Black Lotus*'s lobby. "Can you repeat that…?"

"We've recovered multiple data storage caches from the pirate ships we took down that appear to contain coordinates leading to the pirates' headquarters. Mei is still analyzing them, but if you want, we can send you the data we aren't done analyzing yet along with the cipher keys we already decoded. We can also hand the data caches themselves over right now."

After saving the Screech Owls and looting the wreckage of the pirate ships we'd defeated, we'd recovered a bunch of borderline-junk equipment and multiple data caches. I'd had Mei start analyzing the latter on our way back and subsequently discovered the things I'd just reported to Serena.

"You just started hunting the pirates today, and it isn't even noon yet, but you've already brought back such critical information? Are you working *with* them, by any chance…?"

"Of course not; that doesn't even make sense. Anyway, it's not like I can control what I find. It isn't my fault."

It was possible that my bad luck and the mysterious power of my destiny had brought this situation about, but that kind of supernatural explanation just didn't sit right with me. Still, given the events that occurred around me, I couldn't refute that trouble was strangely likely to find its way to me.

Serena sighed. "Very well. Making quick progress is a good thing. There's nothing wrong with eliminating the pirates as rapidly as possible."

"You're the best, Colonel. I knew you'd understand."

"I'll have a port number relayed to you. Please send us the data caches."

"Aye aye, ma'am." I saluted as the transmission ended.

Before long, a port number used by the cargo-transportation system arrived, which I forwarded to Mei. Mei could now send the data caches, including the data she was still working on, over to Colonel Serena.

"What should we do now?"

"It shouldn't take long before we receive a request to attack the pirates' base," I said, "so we can just wait around till then."

"Can we really just sit around? Won't Miss Serena scold you if you don't work, my lord?"

"We already exceeded expectations by discovering and passing along those data caches. We'll make plenty of money from takedowns and bounties during the attack on the base, so there's no need to run around right now."

The equipment we'd scavenged would keep Tina and Wiska busy for a while, and the *Black Lotus*'s hold was pretty full too. Laser cannons and other equipment filled a lot of space.

"Taking work seriously is important, but there's no need for any unnecessary risks. In the end, as long as we manage to make a lot of money, that's all that matters."

We weren't heroes fighting evil; we were mercenaries who hunted pirates for bounties. Our earnings were the important thing. We weren't fighting for honor or for any particular goal, nor were we interested in military exploits. I'd already achieved platinum

rank, the highest rank the mercenary guild offered, so there was nothing to be gained by making further contributions.

"Even if we try to avoid taking risks, risks will come to us," Elma said, having apparently just come out of the *Black Lotus*'s shower.

"Don't say that. Anyway, good job, everyone," I said, holding my fist out to her.

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks," Elma replied, fist-bumping me before joining us on the sofa. Mimi was already seated to my left, with Kugi on my right. Elma sat next to the latter.

"It's been a while since you fought solo. How was it?" I asked her.

"Being in the cockpit by myself was kind of lonely, and I had to do everything on my own. That's a lot of work. I found myself calling for Mimi out of habit while fighting."

"Hmm... Should Mimi fly with you for a while, then? That'd be good experience for her too."

"Mm... I'll pass. For now, I need to get used to piloting again."

"Okay. Since it would be good training for Mimi, though, just let me know when you're ready."

That *would* be a necessary step for Mimi to improve, and I pretended to ignore Elma's glance at Mimi. I also pretended not to feel the intense stare stabbing me from the left.

Just then, my terminal received a call. I saw that it was from the Screech Owls. *Is it Captain Souls? We did exchange contact information when we last spoke.* "This is Hiro. Did something happen?"

"Souls. Nah. I'm just taking my guys out for a meal; care to join us? We owe your crew one for saving us, so let us treat you."

"Sure. That said, it'll cost you. I can't hold my alcohol, so I don't drink, but we've got three—no, four—drunkards on board."

"It's fine. Just selling the stuff we salvaged from the pirates will be more than enough to cover it. We didn't come home emptyhanded from exploring either."

The Screech Owls brought something back from the unexplored system? I have a bad feeling about that. Hopefully I'm just overthinking

things. My instincts screamed at me to get the Screech Owls away from the cargo they'd retrieved.

"Fine, then. We'll accept your generosity. We've got eight—no, seven people. One doesn't eat."

"Doesn't eat…? All right. I'll send you the meeting spot."

Souls relayed information on one of the *Dauntless*'s restaurants to my terminal. *Hmm. Well, the restaurant itself seems safe.* That said, it was best to remain on guard; it was possible that the explorers were only pretending to be friendly and were really plotting something. As captain, it was my responsibility to guarantee the safety of my crew.

"Okay, we'll meet you there. We'll head out once we're ready, which may take a bit."

"Got it. How does meeting in an hour sound?"

"Let's do that." After speaking to Souls, I told my crew, "So everyone…as you heard, we're going to go eat with the Screech Owls."

Mimi seemed reluctant. "Hmm… That worries me a little."

"Yeah, their operator was really coming on to you, right? Just stick close to me, and you'll be fine."

"If that's the case, it's probably best for *all* of us to stick close to Hiro," Elma said.

"Then let's stick close!" Mimi piped up. "Super close! You too, Kugi!"

"S-super close? Like this?"

Mimi and Kugi pressed against me from both sides. *Yeah, they're definitely going a bit overboard. I can't say I'm not enjoying this, but if we stick* this *close, people will stare.*

"You've got your work cut out for you, Hiro. You'll have to somehow look after me, Tina, and Wiska as well while you're hemmed in like that. Oh—since you said eight people, is Konoha coming too? That'll make things even harder for you."

"I know you guys want to drink, but look out for yourselves a little too, all right? Control yourselves…" *I'm already worried about*

the bad feeling I'm getting about the explorers' cargo, so please don't add anything for me to worry about. Please.

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"Yo. This is our first time meeting in person… Got to say, you're quite something."

Upon encountering me—or rather, *us*—face to face, not through a holo-display, Captain Souls's face stiffened. As they'd said they would, Mimi and Kugi both clung to one of my arms, sticking to me like glue. Elma walked beside me unconcerned; Tina, Wiska, Konoha, and Mei also moved alongside us.

"You've accomplished a man's dream, eh?" Souls observed. "Impressive. You *are* a platinum-ranker."

Huh? I don't remember sharing my rank with the explorers…but I guess it's not hard to find that info. There is *a mercenary's guild on the* Dauntless*.*

"So I'm Souls," the explorers' captain continued. "Nice to meet you and your ladies."

I had Mimi and Kugi release my arms so I could exchange a handshake with Souls. He was a man in his prime, and a handsome one at that. He was what some people would've described as an attractive middle-aged man, his eyes gray and his short hair tinged the same shade. Nothing about his clothing stood out, but he was tall with a good figure—not overly muscular, but neither out of shape nor weak-looking. A well-balanced body.

"Let's head on in. I've reserved seats."

At Souls's invitation, we entered the restaurant alongside his crew. According to Mimi, this place wasn't registered as a restaurant on the *Dauntless*, but rather as an entertainment facility; it was supposed to be some type of bar. The establishment was designed to cater to groups who wanted to bond, and it could serve food and drinks to dozens of guests.

"Our crew has someone who knows tons of places like this. He was pretty excited about today's meet-up, but…" Souls glanced at a member of his crew whose current expression reminded me of a

Tibetan fox. The young man practically leaked despondency. *Is he okay?*

"Ha…! Let this be a good lesson for that idiot," Souls said. "Show him what it means to be in a different league, will ya?"

"I'd rather not have to deal with unnecessary trouble."

Captain Souls slapped my back heartily as we took our seats. One unusual thing about this bar was that it apparently operated like a buffet. They prepared a ton of food, and customers selected what and how much they wanted. It was up to them whether they ate standing or at one of the provided seating areas. *Is alcohol here also just self-serve? No—it seems like you can serve your own drinks, but you can also order them through service robots.* Requiring drunkards to serve themselves would be dangerous, after all.

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Thus, our dinner together began, and before long things…did *not* take a turn for the worse.

"Dude, any feelings of jealousy we had circled all the way back to respect instead."

"Yeah, man. Like, how do I put it…? You know… Hiro, you're something else."

"O-oh."

For some reason, the young men from the explorer crew had surrounded *me* rather than Mimi and Kugi. I'd apparently become a focus of respect, since six women—Mei being a Maidroid—followed me around. Konoha wasn't exactly a female follower of mine, but the young crew members probably didn't care to listen to my explanations.

"This is the first time I've seen someone build such an impressive harem," one said. "That tradition—or whatever you'd call it—is pretty outdated. It's practically gathering dust."

"All those girls are super freaking cute too! How'd you do it? Teach us your secret!"

The playboy who'd been hitting on Mimi had recovered and was now asking me questions along with the rest of the crew members.

"Secret? There isn't one. It just happened. I simply went with the flow. All I can really say is not to let opportunities slip through your fingers. And regardless of the end result, if you get involved in something, be prepared to take responsibility for your actions."

I wasn't lying; the only one of the women whom I'd actively tried to bring onto my ship was Elma. I'd saved Mimi impulsively, and the subsequent events just happened to lead her to board my ship. So, again, the only girl I'd brought aboard because I wanted her as a crew member was Elma.

"What shocks me is you already have six cute girls around you, but you still went and got a Maidroid too. And that Maidroid looks like she has insane specs." This time, a weak-looking boy with glasses was addressing me. He fit the stereotypical image of a nerd. I called his eyewear "glasses," but they looked mechanical, so they were probably some kind of wearable computer.

"That's true," I acknowledged. "If you wanted to make a Maidroid with the same specs as Mei, it'd cost hundreds of thousands of Ener."

"Hundreds of thousands?! That's cheaper than a ship, but… How do I put it…? Can you handle it?" the weak-looking boy asked, thrusting his hips.

"Well…I'm pretty ripped, and our chef is amazing," I answered. Flexing my stomach muscles, I gave them a couple good thumps with my fist.

The Steel Chef 5 automatic cooker we owned *did* prepare my meals based on my exercise routine, or at least, it was supposed to. I'd heard that, to determine which nutrients I needed, it used data collected from medical-pod scans, my terminal, the training room's equipment, and even Mei. It was way too high-tech.

"If you get into daily shootouts with pirates, get caught up in a noble's schemes, charge into swarms of crystal life-forms, fight living weapons with and without power armor, clash with nobles trying to kill you with their swords, and have the airborne

technology carrying you crash land, then you'll have the same opportunities as me, whether you want them or not."

"Yeah… No."

"We'd be dead if we did any of that."

"Well, I'm in the situation I'm in today because of all the trouble I get dragged into. Don't make me spell it out." *Listing the things that happened like that really makes it clear how crazy they've been. How* am *I alive?* "Anyway, speaking of troubles—you guys are no stranger to them either, given what you ran into today, right?"

"Oh, man… I really thought we were goners today."

"At the very least, if you hadn't arrived, *I'd* be dead. Our shields were down, and our plating had been pierced. I'd resigned myself to dying."

Oh? This geeky-looking kid had apparently piloted the small combat craft that the explorers used as a guard ship. That was kind of unexpected, since he looked like such a weak nerd.

"I think I get it. So you're saying meeting you today is an opportunity for us?"

"Oh, you're challenging me?" I asked jokingly. "So you've chosen death?"

"Nah. I was just kidding. We can't take you."

"Still…a Maidroid… I want one! They can support you when you fight, right?"

"Yeah. And if you focused your spending on her positron brain and left out installing actual combat abilities, she'd probably cost somewhere around 100,000 Ener. That should be affordable."

"That is more affordable… Hmm…" Glasses—I believed his name was Hector—had sunk deep into thought, completely forgotten about eating.

Asking this should be safe now, right? I'll give it a shot. "Oh, right. Your captain mentioned something about having found some treasure in the unexplored star system?"

"Oh, he told you? Yeah, we did! It's pretty amazing—wait. Am I allowed to talk to you about it?"

“I’m a mercenary, not an explorer. I don’t care where you found it; I was just curious because who *wouldn’t* be interested in treasure, you know?”

“That’s true. This is just between us, okay? It looks something like this.”

The explorer took out his terminal and showed me a hologram of a suit of multipurpose power armor geared toward explorers. Next to it was a sphere.

“It’s this ball thing here. It reflects lasers, and it’s super tough. It’s definitely man-made, and so was the place we found it. We think it might be an artifact, which is really exciting.”

“Yeah… Makes sense. By the way, did you guys leave any crew back on the ship?”

“No. We’re all here.” The frivolous-looking young crew member turned to study the rest of the venue.

Meanwhile, Captain Souls was drinking with the drunkards on my crew. Mei watched over Mimi and Kugi as they talked with slightly older members of the explorer group.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I said.

“No prob.”

I took out my terminal, selected Colonel Serena in my contacts, and called her.

Before long, she picked up. “What’s the matter? If you’re worried about the data caches, they’ve safely arrived—”

“Colonel, I found one of those spheres. It’s aboard a Screech Owls vessel. None of the crew is on board with it at the moment.”

There was a pause.

“Uh…Colonel?”

“Shut up for a second. It’s taking all my focus to control my emotions.”

I paused. “You seem extremely irritated, but I have to insist that this isn’t my fault. Really. I swear it with god as my witness.”

“I know, so can you please shut up?”

“Okay.” *She’s definitely pissed! Yikes! It really* isn’t *my fault!*

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“So Hiro. Captain Goddamn Hiro. Care to explain what the hell’s going on?”

Thirty minutes had passed since I contacted—or, well, reported the Screech Owls to—Colonel Serena. We were now gathered outside the docking area where the Screech Owls had moored their ships. The two medium craft serving as their motherships were surrounded by marines conducting a compulsory search of the vessels. The giant hatches that led to the spaces wherein the ships transported cargo were wide open; marines continually carried out containers from inside.

“If my eyes don’t deceive me, soldiers are forcing their way into my precious ships and carrying out our cargo. What the hell’s happening? Get me up to speed.” Captain Souls’s face was bright red from alcohol, rage, or both. He looked as though he were about to explode.

Now then… How do I handle this? If I were a smoker, this is where I’d take out and light a cig, but unfortunately, I don’t drink or *smoke.* Tobacco was banned, anyway, since it polluted the precious air in colonies and spaceships. There weren’t many smokers in this universe. “It’s a long story.”

“If you don’t explain, I’ll open a hole in your face with this laser gun here.” Captain Souls pointed at the weapon on his hip.

Stop, stop! If you act aggressive at such close proximity, then even if I don’t react, Mei will definitely beat you up. “I never said I wouldn’t explain, just that it’s a long story. It starts in the Wyndas System. You know where that is, right?”

“It’s got the largest shipyard in the Empire. What about it?”

“I had some minor business to handle, so I docked there for a bit. While I was there, I got involved in an incident. I was attacked by murderous robots. Thankfully, I can hold my own in combat and managed to survive. But they’d already slashed a few people to shreds before they came after me. The army got involved, and the incident blew up.”

“I don’t get it. What does all that have to do with the Imperial army searching my ships?”

Captain Souls crossed his arms, still red in the face. As you’d expect of a veteran explorer, he controlled himself despite the situation. *Or maybe he simply figured that threatening me with brute force wouldn’t work?*

“I told you it’s a long story, didn’t I?” I repeated. “The problem has to do with the victims and those murder robots. The victims were a shopkeeper who sold rare goods on Wyndas Tertius and customers who happened to be in their store. The robots originally looked like round spheres—mysterious round spheres. After investigating, the army determined that they’d been brought from this edge world. You guys might not know this, but not long after the Imperial Fleet and we mercenaries arrived here as reinforcements, the army conducted a search of the artifact shops on the *Dauntless*. During that search, they discovered one of those spheres, and it caused another incident.”

There’s no point telling him that I happened to be present there too, so I’ll just leave that part out.

“I didn’t want to just ignore what I’d seen, only to find out tomorrow morning that you and your whole crew had been slashed to pieces. That’s why I reported it. I’m not going to claim I had good intentions, but at the very least, I didn’t do it out of malice.”

“We’re not amateurs. We’ve been through plenty of tight spots ourselves.”

“This isn’t something you could handle. Not only are otherwise-lethal lasers useless against those things, not even a direct hit from a plasma launcher would do anything. Heavily armed marines with power armor, laser launchers, and plasma launchers struggled against them. I would’ve died myself if I didn’t know how to use these bad boys.” As I said that, I patted the hilts of the two swords at my waist. To protect the marines’ image, I left out the part where they’d used improvised maces.

“Damn it… Even if I understand what you’re saying, that doesn’t change the fact that marines are dirtying my ships with their messy boots right now. Shit.”

“Uh…Captain? What’s going to happen to the money we were supposed to make?”

“The army’s removing all our cargo, and there’s nothing we can do about it, so we’ll just have to make *them* pay for it. They’ll also have to compensate us for soiling our ships with their boots. Let’s go, boys.”

The Screech Owls crew responded with an “Aye aye, sir!” as they followed Captain Souls toward their ships.

“So what are *we* going to do?”

“There’s no point in us going with them, so let’s head back to the ship,” I said. “Even if I don’t say anything, Colonel Serena is bound to contact us later any—”

I’d tried proposing that we head back for the day, but I was interrupted by a spoiled drunkard pulling my arm. “Honnn! I still wanna drink!”

Ow. You’re going to tear my arm off! Although Tina was small, she was insanely strong. Wiska was also tugging my jacket sleeve. *At least she’s a bit more reserved about it. Cute.*

“Can’t you just drink once we get back to the ship?”

“The hell?! That ain’t the same thing! Drinking at home and livin’ it up at a bar ain’t the same thing at all!”

“Huh…?”

Tina stamped her feet, making quite a racket. *Could you not stomp on* my *feet when you do that? You might actually break bones.* I looked at Wiska, Elma, Mimi, Kugi, and Konoha one after the other. *Hmm… It’s true that, since I reported the Screech Owls, we finished up early today. Everyone might be feeling a little cheated.*

“Mimi, can you find somewhere nicer? Price is no object.”

“Leave it to me!” Mimi smiled and puffed out her chest.

Nice. I won’t specify what’s *nice, but nice. Looking at Mimi really cheers me up. But you don’t need to rub your chest with such a serious expression, Kugi. Whether they’re large, small, or average-sized, all breasts are worthy of respect. Oops, I specified. Oh well.*

“Let’s go for a second round—just our group,” I suggested. “I’m sure we’ll get dragged into a bunch of annoying stuff again

tomorrow, so let's enjoy ourselves for today." Acting like normal mercenaries and going all out, as if we couldn't run out of money, couldn't hurt every once in a while. *And I guess we technically* can't *run out of money. At least, not in a single day.*

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The next day, I got a message from Colonel Serena requesting that I come to the bridge of the *Dauntless*. A summons to appear.

"She's technically our direct employer right now, since we're undertaking a mission for the military, so we can't refuse this."

"That's just how things are." Kugi nodded.

She must still have been paying attention to her surroundings as we walked, because her ears were twitching back and forth. *Cute.*

"Even if so, normal mercenaries would never get a summons from a colonel or lieutenant," Elma observed with a shrug. She walked opposite Kugi, sandwiching me between them.

"For someone of Sir Hiro's stature, such summons will likely be a common occurrence," said Konoha. She walked next to Kugi, a look of understanding on her face. After yesterday's battle and the incident with the Screech Owls, I felt as though Konoha had begun to respect me. *Did I do something that tugged her heartstrings?*

I was accompanied by Elma, Kugi, and Konoha today, but technically Konoha wasn't *exactly* accompanying me; she was coming along as an advisor in regard to the spheres, which were essentially inert metal spiders.

Meanwhile, Mimi and the twins would do their best to sell some of our spoils, plus resupply anything we needed. That type of work had mainly been left to Mimi in the past, but if Tina and Wiska could help her out, that would free her up for other things. Mimi had advanced to the point that she could be the one teaching others some of the basics of being a mercenary. For her part, Mei would watch over them. She could've come with me instead, but in the unlikely event that one of those spheres ended up attacking the *Black Lotus*, Mei could protect the crew. Maybe I was just being too careful; then again, I didn't think it was possible to be too careful

once we entered the “trouble comes knocking” phase. There was no telling where it’d come from, so it was best always to be on guard.

“Impressive as always, my lord.”

“I wouldn’t call it impressive. This summons is also unwanted trouble. It’s not an honor, that’s for sure.”

“Meeting with bigwigs and getting to know them isn’t a bad thing…but it’s not always a good thing either.”

“But this is the fate of those with power, especially those who produce results.”

I was used to Kugi praising me and Elma agreeing with me, but *Konoha* sympathizing with me was new. *Elma must find it odd too, since she’s making a weird face. Wait—she’s looking at me.*

“I know what you’re thinking, but I’m innocent,” I told her.

“Are you, now?” Elma replied.

Kugi and Konoha both seemed confused by our conversation. *It’s nothing important. Don’t worry about it.*

“I’ll make sure to ask later,” Elma added. “I’ll ask *both* of them.”

“Do whatever you want. Oh—the security gate.”

We’d arrived at the gate separating the normal districts from the restricted ones, so it was time to focus. Not that there would be any problem gaining entrance, since I had proper ID, and I’d already informed them in advance that three people would accompany me. We passed through the guarded gate without issues, then followed our guide—an Imperial soldier stationed on the *Dauntless,* not one of Colonel Serena’s subordinates—to the bridge.

“Wow. This place is big.”

“It is.”

After walking a bit, we reached the bridge of the *Dauntless*, and it was huge. The *Black Lotus*’s cockpit and bridge area was pretty big itself, yet it was nothing compared to this space. It probably had the same area as an entire floor of a large office building. The center of the bridge was elevated by a step, and around it were multiple holo-displays. *Is that central command? Oh, Colonel Serena is over there, so probably. She really stands out, even from a distance.*

“Over there, right?”

“Yes. Follow me.”

A uniformed and extremely macho-looking soldier led us to the bridge’s central command center. As we passed the holo-displays, I glanced at the information they showed, but I didn’t understand a thing. The *Dauntless* was a gigantic ship the size of a colony; it probably handled completely different information from a combat ship like mine. If I’d sat down, paid close attention, and gotten to play around with the holo-displays for a bit, I might’ve figured them out, but simply reading some data as I passed wasn’t enough for me to make heads or tails of anything.

“You’re here.”

Seeing us arrive, Colonel Serena narrowed her eyes. She seemed somewhat exhausted, her voice lacking its usual energy.

“I’ll handle introductions,” she continued. “This is the captain of supply mothership *Dauntless*, Major General Anselm Esleben. Major General Esleben, this is Captain Hiro. He’s a platinum-ranker in the mercenary guild, and he’s the troublemaker who found key information in both incidents.”

“That’s quite a rude introduction,” I interjected. “It’s an honor to meet you, Major General. I’m Captain Hiro. These two are my crew members Elma and Kugi. This here is Lady Konoha, a military officer of the Holy Verthalz Empire. She’s acting as an observer in the matter regarding the artifacts.”

“Major General Anselm Esleben,” Esleben replied.

He reached out for a handshake, so I obliged obediently. He was a middle-aged man with distinctive, sharp silver-gray eyes. They had a more silver tinge than Captain Souls’s, and Esleben’s sharp expression was chilling to look at. His hair was the same silver-gray as his eyes, and the slightly longer strands were tied behind his head. He was quite a good-looking man. Given his bearing and the sword at his waist, he was likely of noble blood.

“So for what reason was I summoned here today?”

Scrutinizing me, Esleben answered, “You were summoned because I asked to see you.” Done with me, he looked over at Elma and Kugi. “Hmm…”

Elma responded with a defiant look, while Kugi simply smiled.

“It’s hard to accept that your involvement in these incidents was merely coincidence. But, as the colonel said, none of you appear to have anything to hide.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Wait—what? How can you tell?” I asked. “Hold on—you suspected us?”

“The colonel didn’t suspect you of any wrongdoing. It seems that she checked your background thoroughly. *I’m* the one who suspected you. It’s unfortunate, but I had no reason to trust you.”

The Major General’s silver-gray eyes studied me again. *What’s up with that? It’s like he can see through anything. Are those eyes of his some kind of lie detector?*

“When humans have something to hide, they react in certain ways, whether they want to or not. Whether it affects their heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, or facial muscles—any of a number of things—there will be some sort of reaction. I was unable to detect any such reaction in you or your crew. That’s all there is to it.”

“Gotcha,” I said. “Nobles are scary.”

The major general was saying that he could determine whether we had something to hide simply by looking at us. He must’ve significantly boosted his senses and brain processing speed. *That must be rough.*

“It’s nothing to be concerned about. I can turn it on and off as I wish.”

“I see… Wait. I beg your pardon?”

“That was one of the things I can detect,” Major General Esleben answered, shrugging.

He’s saying that he could somehow read my feelings of sympathy? That’s terrifying.

“Now that introductions are out of the way, let’s get down to business. It’s time to deal with those pirates,” said Colonel Serena, directing the conversation to the next topic as if she’d been waiting for the right timing.

Yeah…thanks. When it comes to nobles, you really can't tell what the limits are. I need to do my best to avoid them.

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"We were able to locate the pirates' base using the data caches you got from them. Right here, on the opposite side of the central star from the *Dauntless*. This area is in the outer system, near the hyperlane exit to an unexplored system."

Colonel Serena pointed at a specific spot on a system map shown on a holo-display. *I see. The asteroid belt and central star are in the way, which made them hard for the* Dauntless *to find. The pirates can also catch explorers easily on the way back from the unexplored system.* I wasn't sure whether the pirate base had just happened to be there from the start, or if they'd built it hastily after seeing where the *Dauntless* established itself, but their current position seemed quite well thought out.

"Our scouts have also already provided exact coordinates for the defenses we can expect to face," said Major General Esleben. "The pirates are already gearing up to flee, so we have to act quickly." The holo-display's glow illuminated his sharp features.

Hm… Handsome people sure command attention. Is this the aura generals have?

"I see," I said. "We're prepared to set out anytime. What do the rest of our forces look like?"

"The *Dauntless*'s fighters are prepared to sortie."

"As luck would have it," Colonel Serena said, "the Pirate-Hunting Unit is also prepared to launch, since we've finished maintenance and resupplying, though we were *interrupted* right before we set out. Some of the mercenaries are already out hunting, so we won't have the full force at our disposal. Still, that shouldn't be a problem if we have the *Dauntless*'s fighters with us."

When she mentioned being "interrupted," Colonel Serena had shot a look at me. *Sorry, okay? It wasn't out of malice.*

"In that case," I said, "we should launch now, eliminate the pirates, and get this over with. Based on the strength of our ships,

it's true that we could just crush them in one wave through brute force. If we want to keep them from running away, though, it'd be best to place the Pirate-Hunting Unit's firepower mainly in the outer system, then send mercenaries and fighters into the asteroid belt to hunt pirates down at close quarters. We should also place our gravity jammers at the edge of the inner system with some guard ships to block their escape route."

As I explained my idea, I adjusted the holo-display, placing our forces to show us launching a pincer attack on the pirates' base. If the *Dauntless*'s fighters lacked experience, then fighting within the asteroid belt might be dangerous for them, but these types of battles were what their ships were designed for. Fighters were smaller than regular small ships and could make use of speed and numbers to cause mayhem in a brawl like this. If we wanted to make use of those specialties, then this would be a good strategy.

"I was going to ask how you know about gravity jammers, but I just remembered that you recently acquired a medium ship from Ideal Starways," remarked Serena.

"So you *do* have a few gravity jammers yourself. I thought you might." I shrugged. *Those have limited uses. There's a reason Elma and I thought they might be intended for you.*

While gravity jammers weren't too versatile, they'd still be very effective equipment for star system armies and the Pirate-Hunting Unit. Those forces could rush to the scene of a pirate attack, activate a gravity jammer, and then take their time deciding whether to shoot down or capture the pirates, who would no longer be capable of escape.

"We'll consider the strategy you propose, Captain Hiro. The finer details, we'll work out ourselves," Major General Esleben said.

"Aye aye, sir. Then my companions and I will head back now and prepare for battle."

"Please do so. I doubt I have to mention this..."

"Yup. You don't want me to tell anyone until orders are sent out. Understood." I turned to the others. "You three, no telling anyone, got it?"

"Of course."

“Yes, my lord.”

“Very well.”

Elma, Kugi, and Konoha all nodded when I looked over. Even if this information did leak, it likely wouldn’t change anything; still, it was better for plans not to leak. *Let’s be careful.*

“Oh, right. Colonel, any updates on that incident with the sphere?”

“We’ve put that on hold for the moment. We’re still questioning and *negotiating* with the party involved. But dealing with the pirates is a more urgent matter. Besides, we already secured the object in question.”

I hesitated. “Don’t let that thing break out and escape, you hear me?”

“I’m not sure what exactly you’re worried about, but we’re currently storing it in a shielded container secured with scan-permeable sealants. Not even a titan-class combat robot could escape such conditions. It’s being analyzed by a temporary research team right now, and I’ve been hoping to have Lady Konoha take a look as well, once we make some progress.”

“Understood,” Konoha said. “If you intend to communicate with the being, it would be best for you to bring Lady Kugi as well. When it comes to the second magic—telepathy—Lady Kugi is the expert.”

“I see. Captain Hiro?” Colonel Serena eyed me, so I nodded and looked over at Kugi.

“I don’t plan to hold back anything that might help,” I said. “Kugi, you’re fine with doing that, right?”

“Yes, my lord. I will assist to the best of my ability,” Kugi replied, perking up her ears.

That concluded our business, and the meeting was adjourned. *Now, it’d be great if things went smoothly… A temporary research team, huh? I didn’t know Colonel Serena had subordinates capable of conducting research. Or did she just hire researchers temporarily? I’m kind of curious.*

***

As we left the restricted district and returned to our ship, we remained on our best behavior. We didn't know how long we had before the operation would start, so we didn't take any detours this time.

"We're back," I announced.

"Welcome back, Master Hiro. That was fast."

Upon returning to the *Black Lotus*, I found Mimi and the mechanic sisters in the hangar, looking down at a tablet. *Are they checking our inventory?*

"They make decisions quickly," I declared. "In more ways than one."

Besides Colonel Serena, who I'd had a long relationship with, Major General Esleben was also direct and to the point. It hadn't taken him long to place a certain level of trust in me.

"Prepare for departure," I told the others. "We might have to do an emergency takeoff, so if anything will take time to load, then finish purchasing the goods and pay, but leave them out here for now."

"That sure came outta nowhere," Tina remarked. "No problem, though; we don't need to replenish much, so it'll be done in a jiffy."

"Since we're heading back out, does that mean we're going after the pirates?" Mimi asked.

"Yup. The data caches we brought back are paying off immediately."

"I see. What about the sphere?"

"That issue got put on hold. They managed to secure the thing, but they intend to take their time questioning the Screech Owls about it. As long as the object is in their possession, it's not an emergency."

"Makes sense. What do you think Colonel Serena plans to do with that thing, anyway?" Tina asked.

"I think I know what her goal might be. Still, I can't be sure what her plan is," Wiska added.

“Yeah, I’m in the same boat,” I replied.

All three of us were puzzled. I really had no idea how Serena planned to resolve everything. In terms of goals, somehow adapting the spheres’ casing into a material that could be freely modified and reproduced, rendering it usable as plating, would be ideal. Colonel Serena’s unit wasn’t exactly the right fit to accomplish that, though. Her fleet was intended to hunt pirates; exploring unexplored systems and researching unknown materials weren’t in their wheelhouse.

However, a temporary research team *had* recently been assigned to the Pirate-Hunting Unit. The *Lestarius* was a big ship, so they might just have remodeled one section of it into a research division.

“Either way, chances are that Colonel Serena will do something about it after we deal with the pirates. And we’ll get dragged into it whether we want to or not, so just be ready.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Readiness *would* be best.”

The pair from Verthalz nodded in agreement. Once those two had joined my ship, getting dragged into incidents involving those spheres—the metal killer spiders—had, as I’d said, become unavoidable. Rather than futilely trying to defy my fate, it made more sense just to prepare myself for the inevitable.

Doesn’t mean I have to like it, though. What would the worst-case scenario look like? I’d probably have to deal with those spheres changing shape as they attacked me—and would I need to land on an unexplored planet? Hell no—landing on a planet like that where aggressive aliens or battle mechs are hiding would be something right out of a sci-fi thriller flick.

“For now, let’s just focus on the enemy in front of us,” I continued. “The *Black Lotus* will likely join the frontal assault, the *Krishna* will probably participate in the brawl inside the asteroid belt, and I think the *Antlion* will be stationed at the edge of the inner system to stall pirates trying to escape. Be on your toes. Odds are they’ll assign guard ships to the *Antlion*, and there’ll be other ships armed with gravity jammers nearby, so you won’t be in too much danger, Elma. Still, I want you to stay especially alert. There’s a good

chance that you'll be someplace the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* can't immediately back you up. Don't be stingy when it comes to firepower."

"It's nothing new at this point, Hiro, but you sure are overprotective."

"Of course I am. I don't care if your ship gets destroyed, but *you* have to stay alive, got it? As long as you're alive, you can always start again."

"Yeah, yeah, I understand. Safety first, and no being stingy."

"I'm glad you get it. That said, this arrangement won't let the *Antlion* earn much, so I'll request additional payment for services rendered."

Our unit was built on the idea of the *Antlion* and the *Krishna* working together. And if we asked for a bonus, nobody could blame us: We'd be contributing the use of special equipment and thus doing something others couldn't.

"How greedy," Tina interjected. "What changed, hon?"

"Nothing. I just believe in proper compensation for our services. Remember when I asked that you two be paid properly when those guys wanted to borrow your skills?"

"Ah…good point."

Wiska's eyes grew distant. She must've been recalling how she and Tina had run themselves ragged repairing all the damaged mercenary ships back when we'd fought the crystal life-forms. I'd made sure we were properly compensated, since we'd let our allies borrow the *Black Lotus*'s facilities and the skills of its crew. This time, I'd ask them to pay us for providing the *Antlion*'s gravity jammer as a strategic asset.

"Prepare for departure," I directed. "Everyone focus on your own safety. Got it?"

"Aye aye, sir," The crew answered as one, although Kugi joined in a bit late.

Cute. Do I need to prepare anything myself? I guess I should check on my ninja armor. I probably won't need to use it today, but before long, I'll have to. Although I'd really rather not…

***

Supply mothership *Dauntless* could service and resupply all kinds of combat ships, from small craft all the way to those the size of cruisers and battleships. Thus, it belonged to a class of ships sometimes referred to as “strategic” vessels.

The *Dauntless* was equipped with significant defenses—for example, the countless turrets it could use to pummel enemy ships. Even more terrifying, however, were its interceptor squadrons. Their fighters were extremely small, about half the size—or less—of the small ships used by mercenaries. Still, they boasted roughly the same firepower and significantly superior maneuverability.

Due to their size, those fighters couldn’t be equipped with powerful shield generators, and they didn’t have much defensive plating. In terms of raw combat power, though, they could match a small ship. A significant number of such craft were stationed within the *Dauntless*—not that I knew exactly how many.

“How many interceptors are there?”

“Um…I count a hundred and eighty.”

“That’s a lot, my lord. Is it all of them?”

“No. Probably about half. Some will definitely stay behind to defend the *Dauntless*.”

Since we’d launched first, we could watch the *Dauntless*’s fighters take off from the *Krishna*. The *Dauntless* had six catapults—more like launch tubes—dedicated to fighters, so six fighters at a time flew out in rapid succession. It was quite a sight. Launching 180 ships didn’t even take a minute; it was ridiculously fast.

“All mercenaries seem to use small ships. How come they don’t use fighters instead?”

“Inferior living conditions and interstellar travel functionality, no cargo bay to store loot, less durability, no space to hold ammo for projectile weaponry like multi-cannons or seeker missiles… There are a lot of cons. It solves a lot of those problems if you operate one in conjunction with a mothership like the *Black Lotus*, but small ships are just a lot more convenient for mercenaries.”

“Fighter ships are designed to fight and nothing else,” Mimi added. “Their sensors are weaker too due to their size.”

Elma joined in over a comms line. “They’re a bit lacking if you want to make a living as a mercenary.”

In that case, interstellar travel was a must. Your ship also essentially became your home. The bounty money from hunting pirates was insufficient, so you also had to collect spoils from downed ships. Plus, you sometimes had to engage in multiple long battles in a row, so you needed a ship that could fight for extended periods. Naturally, you also had to come back alive; that meant defense and durability were important factors as well. Fighters were designed to be sent to areas where combat was about to occur or already ongoing. They weren’t good at searching out and hunting down enemies who could be hiding anywhere in a star system. As Mimi had said, they were only good for fighting.

“I see…” After listening to our explanations, Kugi sank into thought.

Hmm… Is Kugi thinking about piloting a fighter? We have space for another small craft in the Black Lotus*’s hangar, so that is possible, but—*

My thoughts were interrupted by a transmission from the *Dauntless*. It wasn’t a voice message, but rather a text message including information on when the operation would begin and data on coordinates.

“Looks like we’re starting.”

“Aye aye, sir. Don’t get shot down.”

“Right back at you.” Elma cut her comms line.

It was time for us to get a move on too. “Mimi, set up the navigator.”

“Okay. I’ll set our arrival time as well.”

Mimi entered the information into the automated flight-control system, programming us to warp out to the specified coordinates at the same time the operation was scheduled to begin.

Leaving FTL travel released a strong energy signal, making it impossible to ambush someone afterward without them having noticed. That was why, in large-scale ambushes—well, assaults—

like this, ships received specific coordinates and warp-out times in advance, so they could all appear near the enemy simultaneously and instantly transition into combat.

It was technically possible to warp out beyond the enemy's range, then slowly creep in while evading detection. But since we planned on crushing them with numbers and firepower, that stealthy strategy didn't match our needs.

"Let's go," I instructed.

"Yes!" Kugi and Mimi responded energetically.

I activated the automated flight-control system. *Let's get started.*

***

Arrows of light streamed behind us, then suddenly stopped, accompanied by the thunderous sound of us warping out.

"Damn it! A bunch of them just showed up behind us!" a pirate cried.

"Don't head to the inner system—you'll get crushed!"

"Then what're we supposed to do?! Just keep flying forever in the asteroid belt?! We can't get away like that!"

"Sounds like our plan is working," I commented.

"Yep."

The *Lestarius* and other ships from the Pirate-Hunting Unit, plus the *Black Lotus*, had already begun bombarding the pirates' base. Those pirates fortunate enough to have escaped before we'd destroyed their launch platforms were now in the asteroid belt. That was all according to plan.

"Linking data... We can see everything."

"The *Dauntless*'s recon ships do good work."

The *Krishna*'s radar cleanly displayed the pirate ships' signals as they swerved left and right within the asteroid field. Apparently, when the *Dauntless* sent their reconnaissance craft out here as scouts, those craft had left some satellites with powerful radar

functionality. The satellites had activated once the operation began, providing us with a perfect overview of the battlefield.

"The subsystems are ready, my lord."

"Okay. We're going in."

I activated our weapon systems and dove into the asteroid belt. The *Dauntless*'s fighters were already there, engaging the pirates. *Seems I'm a bit late…*

"Where should we aim?"

"We'll go right down the middle. Let's do this."

I wasn't sure just how strong the *Dauntless*'s fighters were, but the radar signals indicated that they were making short work of the pirates. That meant I wouldn't earn much if I joined them and hunted at the edges. It was better just to charge into the midst of battle and wreak havoc instead.

I activated our thrusters and wove rapidly through drifting asteroids of various sizes.

Kugi suddenly fell silent. I glanced over to check that she was okay, only to see her white as a sheet, ears drooping. *Mimi took a while to get used to this too.*

"Enemies approaching," Mimi reported.

"Got it," I said.

Racing out from behind an asteroid three times the *Krishna*'s size, I aimed four heavy lasers at one of four pirate ships traveling at low speed.

"Whoa! What?!" one exclaimed.

The pirate's shields were exhausted immediately, and a section near the ship's center exploded. *It wasn't destroyed in one hit? These guys really* do *have decent equipment.*

"Enemy ambush!" another pirate cried. "Mercenary ship!"

"Shit! Take him out!"

They were responding faster than I'd expected. The other three pirate ships, which I hadn't damaged significantly, began countering with laser and multi-cannon turrets.

"Hup!"

Maintaining the momentum of my initial ambush, I blew straight between the asteroids the pirates had hidden behind, then used a different asteroid as a shield to wait out their counterattack. *Huh? A couple of their shots hit me. Not enough to matter, though.*

“Kugi, prepare shield cells.”

“O-okay!”

Once more I leapt out from the cover of the asteroid, this time charging straight at the pirates while firing my four heavy lasers and two flak cannons. Since I was flying right at them, I couldn’t avoid getting hit, but I intended to destroy the pirates before my shields ran out.

“This guy’s firepower is ridiculous!” I heard one cry.

“Gah!”

Two volleys from my four heavy lasers blew one up; my close-range flak cannons destroyed another’s cockpit.

“Wait, I surrend—”

“St-stop! My ship can’t even move anymo—”

I showed no mercy in destroying the final ship, which had started to flee upon seeing me down its allies, nor in destroying the ship that my initial assault had damaged. *Sorry, but I haven’t got pity for pirates, and now I’m competing with the* Dauntless*’s fighter squadron. I don’t have time to deal with your annoying attempts at surrender.*

“Next.”

“Okay!”

The last ship stopped firing at me when it was trying to escape, so I didn’t even need to use a shield cell. I glanced over at Kugi again, but she was still pale with drooping ears. *I know it isn’t easy, but you’ll have to get used to this.*

***

“Stop scattering around on your own! Regroup! We need to break through their perimeter!”

“How the hell are we supposed to regroup?!”

“Run away! Don’t engage! Use the asteroids as shields and run!”

I could still hear the pirates chattering to each other over the comms. Pirates were idiots, so they generally didn’t use encrypted channels, but this time they actually were using a secure line. That showed how well-equipped these guys were compared to other systems’ pirates. Still, their encryption strength was way too low, so we could eavesdrop on them anyway.

“Master Hiro, at this rate, quite a number of them will get through.”

“Nothing we can do about it. Even if they focus on running, we can take them out with my abilities and the *Krishna*’s firepower. Still, although fighters are military vessels, their firepower isn’t enough to guarantee takedowns. So agile pirate vessels with strong shields will likely get through.” We’d planned this formation with that in mind.

“My FTL drive isn’t activating! The safety lock is stuck!” a pirate cried.

“It’s an ambush! Auuugh!”

Those pirates who managed to escape the asteroid belt got caught by the gravity jammers and their guard vessels. Our efforts to chase down the pirates among the asteroids had created a coincidental filter effect, leading pirates to stream through in small numbers to the inner system.

If twenty pirate ships had gotten through at the same time, the jammers and their guards would’ve struggled to stop them. But if twenty ships passed a couple at a time, intercepting them was easy.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Elma demanded. “You’re letting tons through.”

“There’s more of them than I expected,” I replied. “I’m doing my best, okay? Tell the fighters to step it up.”

“Asking them to contribute as much as you would be kind of mean… Bam. One more down.”

It seemed that Elma was also busy fighting in the inner system. If the *Antlion* was participating in the fighting, that had to show that a lot of enemy craft had gotten past. *No… Elma might just be hunting them proactively for their bounties.*

"In any case, I should do my best to improve the situation," I announced. "We're going in again."

"Yes, sir!"

I continued to take down pirates one after another, slipping between asteroids at close proximities. If some of these pirates had banded together to act as a vanguard and allow the other pirates to escape, that would've been pretty annoying to deal with, but the concept of self-sacrifice didn't exist among pirates.

"This is barely a fight at this point," I remarked. "We're just shooting pirates in the butt as they try to run."

"When it's so one-sided, it makes you feel a little guilty."

"They're still pirates, in the end." It wasn't that I'd never considered the ethics of blowing up pirate ships. However, no one who'd seen some of the deeds pirates committed would feel even the slightest pity for them.

"We're about to exit the asteroid belt, my lord."

"Yeah. I figured they'd probably need reinforcements soon."

While "farming" pirates, I'd also been monitoring the radar data the satellites sent. The fighting in the asteroid belt was wrapping up; the pirates who'd escaped the base had made their way through the asteroid belt. They were currently converging on the area where the gravity jammers were stationed.

"Oh, it's a mess here," Mimi said.

"We're charging in."

Leaving the asteroid belt, we were greeted by the sight of pirates going toe to toe with the fighter vessels assigned to guard the jammers. It would be tough to find the *Antlion* in a brawl like this using eyesight alone.

"We're going to go help the *Antlion*. Set up the navigator."

"Okay!"

"Kugi, be prepared to activate subsystems as needed."

“Yes, my lord.”

What pirates I ran into on the way to the *Antlion*, I destroyed in passing. Arm-style weapon holsters with a wide range of motion were extremely useful at times like these. Many of the pirates who ate a direct shot from the *Krishna*’s heavy lasers likely had no idea what had hit them.

“Ah. There she is.”

Farther ahead, I saw a pirate ship flashing. *That has to be from the* Antlion*’s high-output laser-beam emitter roasting it.* That weapon essentially just discharged energy from a capacitor, so it was basically a “vomit beam,” which led to it being dubbed a *gerobi*.[2] Getting hit by one was actually really annoying; it could even deal immediately lethal damage to ships with weak shields and plating.

“Stooooop! I surrender! Surrender!”

That was probably the pilot of the ship being melted, but Elma ignored him. The *Antlion*’s beam must finally have reached the pirate ship’s generator or life-support system, because at that point it caused an explosion.

“No mercy, eh?”

“Oh—you came. Is there a need for mercy with these guys?”

“Nope. Launch some seeker missiles to keep them at bay.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The *Antlion* began firing seeker missiles from its two missile pods. Those would make it harder for the pirates to flee in a straight line. Pirate ships couldn’t typically outrun a seeker missile simply by flying straight.

“Keep up the pace,” I told her.

“Okay. Let’s compete,” Elma replied.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to hold your own.”

“Those are fighting words.”

There was a significant difference in our vessels’ mobility and firepower. *Still, Elma seems to be raring to go. Show me what you got, then!*

***

The plan was progressing smoothly. The *Dauntless*'s fighters more than made up for the fighting power we'd lost because some mercenaries had already set out, and we were able to win the space battle without great difficulty. I'd expected this to be tough, since these were edge-world pirates, but in the end we didn't suffer much damage.

"Have we taken control of the base yet?"

"We finished off the enemy's main forces, but we're still cleaning up some nooks and crannies."

"We've done this many times before, but this part's truly a drag... Make sure to check the marines' mental health afterward."

Most of the marines would end up seeing things that they'd rather not in the pirates' base. The rest spaces were somewhat bearable, but simply recalling the "processing" and "storage" facilities dampened my mood.

"The new equipment is functioning well."

"Yes. The fighters from the *Dauntless* are making significant contributions, but the ability to interfere with FTL drive activation is especially advantageous."

As I listened to my aide, Robertson, give his report, I checked Hiro's stats. As expected, he was running rings—to spare—around the others. Miss Elma was also doing exceptionally well. Their accomplishments should afford me some freedom in rewarding them. My pride wouldn't allow me to favor them just because they were acquaintances, but there was no problem with rewarding people for the good work they'd done.

"If nothing goes wrong—"

"Something went wrong, Colonel."

"...What happened?"

"They discovered one of those spheres. It's still inert, but..."

"What a pain. Send over our reserve forces and collection team."

Things never went smoothly. Was that because of *him*? No, I was overthinking things. Still, events tended to escalate in unexpected ways when he was involved...and he might know something, since he'd known so much about the Mother Crystal. I figured I should meet him directly and grill—er, politely ask him.

***

"Without further ado, let's celebrate our victory!"

"Cheers!"

The four drunkards—no, five, including Colonel Serena—raised their glasses and chugged their drinks. *Is this where I say "skål"? No, that's what the Vikings used to say... It doesn't really fit here. We're on the side that takes down raiders, after all.*

“What’s wrong, Captain Hiro? You don’t seem to be drinking much.”

Colonel Serena had downed her first drink quickly, leaving her free to come over and bother me. We were currently holding an after-party. We had smoothly destroyed the pirates’ base, turning many of the pirates into space debris, so the enterprising colonel had decided to celebrate by providing food and drinks for everyone who’d participated in the operation. Naturally, there were too many participants to fit in a single restaurant, so she’d rented multiple restaurants. She’d also had alcohol and refreshments delivered to the Pirate-Hunting Unit’s ships, using the vessels as temporary gathering spots to produce the grand celebration party we were now joining.

I was stunned speechless by her management abilities. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was wasting those abilities granted to her as a noble. Then again, Colonel Serena never did anything wasteful. She must’ve arranged this event because she felt that it was necessary.

“You seem to be indulging yourself. Make sure you don’t lose control, though,” I replied. “If you screw up today, I can’t cover for you.”

My crew and I had been invited to the Pirate-Hunting Unit’s flagship, the *Lestarius*. Participants who’d made significant contributions to the operation were gathered here; my entire crew had received invitations.

The blonde-haired, red-eyed beauty answered with a sulky “I know that.”

Wait, what? What is she after? She’s definitely sulking on purpose. What is she planning? I immediately raised my vigilance two notches.

I had tried to refuse the invitation. I didn’t want to make things into a big deal, and I felt that a celebration restricted to my own crew would be sufficient. But Colonel Serena had said that it would affect her prestige if the mercenary who’d contributed the most didn’t attend. Since she’d practically begged, it was hard to refuse her. I’d given in, so here I was, but I couldn’t help feeling that something was off about Serena.

“Why does it feel like you’re wary of me?” she added.

“Am I?” I asked, drinking some (fake) sweet tea through a straw. *Mm… This is some of that whatchamacallit—“sweet tea,” right? That lemony or citrusy flavor is pretty nice. Not that real fruit was used.*

“My subordinates are here today too. Nothing’s going to happen,” Serena insisted. “There’s no need for you to be concerned.”

“That makes sense logically, but I believe that type of situation is the riskiest. What’re you plotting?”

“I’m not plotting anything. Aren’t you being a little paranoid?”

Are you sure about that? I feel like you’re lying. Using her authority to force me to do her bidding wouldn’t work anymore. That said, while Colonel Serena seemed like the strategic type, she was actually more about brute force. If I didn’t play my cards right, I could see her strong-arming me to get what she wanted.

“Okay, fine. Let’s have a little heart-to-heart. I won’t lie, Colonel, and neither will you. We’ll play fair.”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“I am, but you’re definitely plotting something. I don’t want to die, and I have a responsibility to my crew.”

“Well, before we talk about what I want to know, I feel like we should discuss how you view me.”

“Let’s do that another time. So what’s your deal?” I demanded, grabbing a (fake) chicken nugget. Since this *was* the colonel, it would definitely have something to do with either pirates or those spheres.

“At this point it’s old hat, but whenever you get involved with something, it tends to escalate quickly,” Serena told me. “You’re not arranging everything behind the scenes, are you?”

“The pirates here were in the area long before I entered the picture, and explorers brought those spheres back from unexplored regions. How in the world would I have arranged all that?”

“That’s true. I understand. Still, I had to ask. That’s just the kind of effect you have.”

“According to Kugi, it’s some talent of mine.”

“Oh—are you talking about that ridiculous story from before? It *is* true that you’re a once-in-a-lifetime figure.” Colonel Serena stared at me. “Well…let’s put that aside for now. I wanted to ask about the spheres. Do you know anything?”

“Should I know something about those? The first time I saw one was when it suddenly attacked me when I went to get my power armor. I don’t know any more than what I’ve learned fighting them. In fact, you guys probably know more than me—you’ve been analyzing them, right?”

Why did she think I’d know something about those? Oh—because I gave her intel on the Mother Crystal, right? She must suspect that I’ve got some key information of “unknown origin.”

“Unlike with the Mother Crystal, this time I really don’t know anything. I ran into one by complete coincidence.”

“Coincidence, you say…” Colonel Serena glared at me with suspicion.

In that incident with the Mother Crystal, I’d provided information out of nowhere that nobody in this universe had known. Thus, it was natural for Serena to suspect that I might understand something about these mysterious spheres that transformed into murderous machines.

“I’m telling the truth. Oh… But I know a couple people who might have info. Hey, Kugi, Konoha, come here for a sec.” When I called Kugi and Konoha, Colonel Serena tensed up visibly. *I guess, as a soldier of the Imperial army, she can’t fully trust people from other empires.*

“Yes, my lord. Greetings, Your Excellency.”

“All right, Sir Hiro. Thank you for inviting me to this banquet, Colonel Serena. It’s truly an honor.”

Kugi and Konoha had walked over to us and greeted Serena with a bow. Watching them, she covered her mouth with one hand. *Right? Their ears are so cute. I’d smile too.*

“Have a seat,” I told them. “Colonel Serena asked me to share all the information I’ve got on those spheres. Sorry for the trouble, but could you tell her what you know?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Kugi. “All I can say for sure is that those things are definitely living beings, and that they communicate with each other with the second magic, known as ‘telepathy.’ However, they don’t use language to do so. Instead, they communicate through danger signals and emotions like fear. Pardon my belittling words, but those spheres are unlikely to be blessed with higher-level intelligence.”

“You mention telepathy as if it’s the most normal thing in the world… Are the Holy Verthalz Empire’s citizens all capable of reading others’ minds?” Colonel Selena asked. Seeming unusually shaken, she pulled back slightly from Kugi.

Huh? Are you hiding something? Well, I guess most people have at least one or two things they’d prefer others not know.

“No. Reading someone else’s thoughts is a deliberate action. It requires either breaking down the other party’s mental barriers or finding a way to slip through and make direct contact with their psyche. Even in Verthalz, only a handful of people can do such a thing without alerting the other party or directly touching them.”

“I-I see…”

Colonel Serena didn’t seem satisfied with Kugi’s explanation. After all, Kugi had only said that very few people could do that, not that *she* couldn’t. Even I had noticed that, so Serena must’ve noticed too.

“Of course, I also lack such power, unless I either make direct contact with the subject, or they open their mind to me,” Kugi clarified with a dazzling smile.

Yeah… I believe her, of course, but that doesn’t mean Colonel Serena does.

“I think we may be getting off topic,” Konoha interjected.

“Uh-huh. We’re here to talk about those spheres. Do you know anything, Konoha?”

“At present, no. Judging by their condition, they must be quite old; they’re likely relics from a civilization skilled in magic. It’s not exactly the same thing, but I’ve read in records kept in Verthalz about an ancient civilization that used similar living terminals.”

“Oh…? An ‘ancient civilization’? How’d it end up being referred to as that?” I asked.

Konoha shook her head. “We never discovered any conclusive evidence, so there’s not much we can say for certain. However, given that not a single corpse from that civilization has been discovered, we can infer that they likely got into trouble with a higher-level existence.”

“Trouble with a higher-level existence?” Colonel Serena was clearly confused.

I had sympathy, but plenty of subcultures back on Earth had considered such a concept, so I wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with the idea. With my own eyes, I had seen hyperlanes and psionic abilities being used in this world; that made it difficult to simply dismiss what Kugi and Konoha were talking about.

“Are you saying that you think this higher-level existence wiped out the entire civilization?” I asked.

“Yes,” Konoha replied. “The theory is that the civilization in question forged a contract with said existence. Or they captured that existence, or did something else to it, and thereby obtained an overwhelming amount of energy.”

“You’re suggesting that their civilization was destroyed either after they broke that contract, or when whatever they’d captured managed to escape and take revenge?” Colonel Serena asked.

Konoha nodded in response to Serena, who then looked over at me.

“You mean that, in a worst-case scenario, we might run into something like that ourselves?” she asked.

“Only in the worst of worst-case scenarios,” I replied. “It probably wouldn’t happen unless we rolled snake eyes three or four times in a row, so to speak.”

“Since you’re involved, such an outcome doesn’t seem all that implausible…”

She’d hit me in my weak spot, because she was right. I *did* have a tendency to attract such problems. “If something like that really did show up, we could just shoot it with reactive warheads and giant lasers.”

"...I'm starting to get a headache," Serena replied, holding her head.

I could sympathize. She had suddenly been told that messing up while interacting with these mysterious alien life-forms' relics might simply wipe out the entire Empire. I'd probably have reacted the same way in her shoes.

"At any rate," Konoha went on, "what we should focus on right now is the being in *control* of those spheres. That being is likely autonomous and in possession of higher-level intelligence, so it would be treated as an intelligent life-form under current galactic law."

"Please stop... I've got more than enough to think about." Serena looked down toward the table and let out a sigh as heavy as a black hole.

I've heard that if an intelligent life-form is discovered in an unexplored star system, things can quickly become quite a mess. Drink up, Colonel; you'll at least be able to forget your worries temporarily.

Chapter 5:
An Unexpected Reunion

THE NEXT DAY...

"Ugh. He really is still sleeping."

My sense of someone entering the room roused me from my light doze. *Who is it at this hour?*

"Come on, wake up. It's already morning—"

When someone tore off my covers, I woke up immediately. "Brrr! What's the big problem?"

"What the...?!"

"Give those back... It's still so early." I grabbed back the bedclothes and covered Elma, who was still dozing next to me. That seemingly hadn't awakened her. Good.

"Ah...uh...wha... Whuh..."

Ignoring the culprit, who was covering her blushing face with both hands—though her fingers were spread wide—I picked up a fabric item that had fallen next to the bed and yawned. I was still a little tired.

"Mm, yeah. My bad. Putting on my briefs now."

I got out of bed and pulled on my underwear. I usually slept in them...but under the circumstances, you couldn't blame a guy for nodding off without putting them back on.

"Mmnnn...?"

"You can keep sleeping."

"Mmm..."

Elma had started to wake, sensing that I'd gotten up, but I straightened the covers and put her back to bed. She'd had a lot to drink yesterday and put in quite an effort afterward, so she was probably still tired.

"Go on," I told my other visitor.

"H-hwokay..."

The bedding thief—Konoha—had frozen stiff, both hands fully covering her face. I grabbed a change of clothes as I chased her out. *I'd rather you didn't jump just because I tapped your back lightly. I'm not trying to scare you.*

"Hah…" I sighed as I left the room. "Still tired. What's *your* deal this early in the morning? I wanted to sleep for a bit longer."

For some reason, Konoha quickly distanced herself from me and glued herself against the wall, glancing at me in profile. *Is she trying to hide? There really aren't any hiding spots in this hallway…*

"Impure… Improper!" Konoha's tail had puffed up, becoming bigger than I'd ever seen.

Does it get bigger if she feels threatened or something? I can't say for sure, but I thought that only cats puffed up their tails when frightened. Is she actually a cat girl with round ears rather than a tanuki girl?

"I mean…when you boarded this ship, I told you that Elma and I… No, that the ship's entire crew and I were in that kind of relationship. I even warned you that people would assume *you* had a relationship like that with me too."

The moment she heard that, Konoha flew away. That wasn't a metaphor; she actually glided over ten meters from me without even winding up for a jump.

What the heck was that weird hop? "Don't launch yourself away. You're too far down the hall now. We can't have a conversation like this."

"Grrrrrr…"

"Now you've reverted to an animal state…? Whatever… Do what you want."

I left Konoha to her own devices, carrying my change of clothes to the shower. She was the one who'd woken me up, so I wasn't going to deal with this bullshit.

***

Feeling refreshed after my shower, I headed to the dining hall, where an inexplicable sight greeted me.

“Do you not realize how rash your actions were? Have you forgotten our purpose?”

“Yes, I do. I’m very sorry… I haven’t forgotten…”

“Are you truly reflecting on your behavior? Do you have any idea what sort of destiny my lord bears? What he lost for all eternity, as well as what he has accomplished and achieved? Do you truly understand? Even if you are a temple guard, there are lines you cannot cross. Have you not learned anything from your past mistakes? Can you truly fulfill your duties as a temple guard in such a state?”

“Yes…you’re right. My moral failings brought this about. I am truly sorry.”

After making Konoha sit on the floor in a seiza position, Kugi had sat directly in front of her in that position herself. She’d then begun to lecture Konoha in earnest. I’d never seen Kugi this serious.

I approached the flustered Mimi and whispered, “How did this happen?”

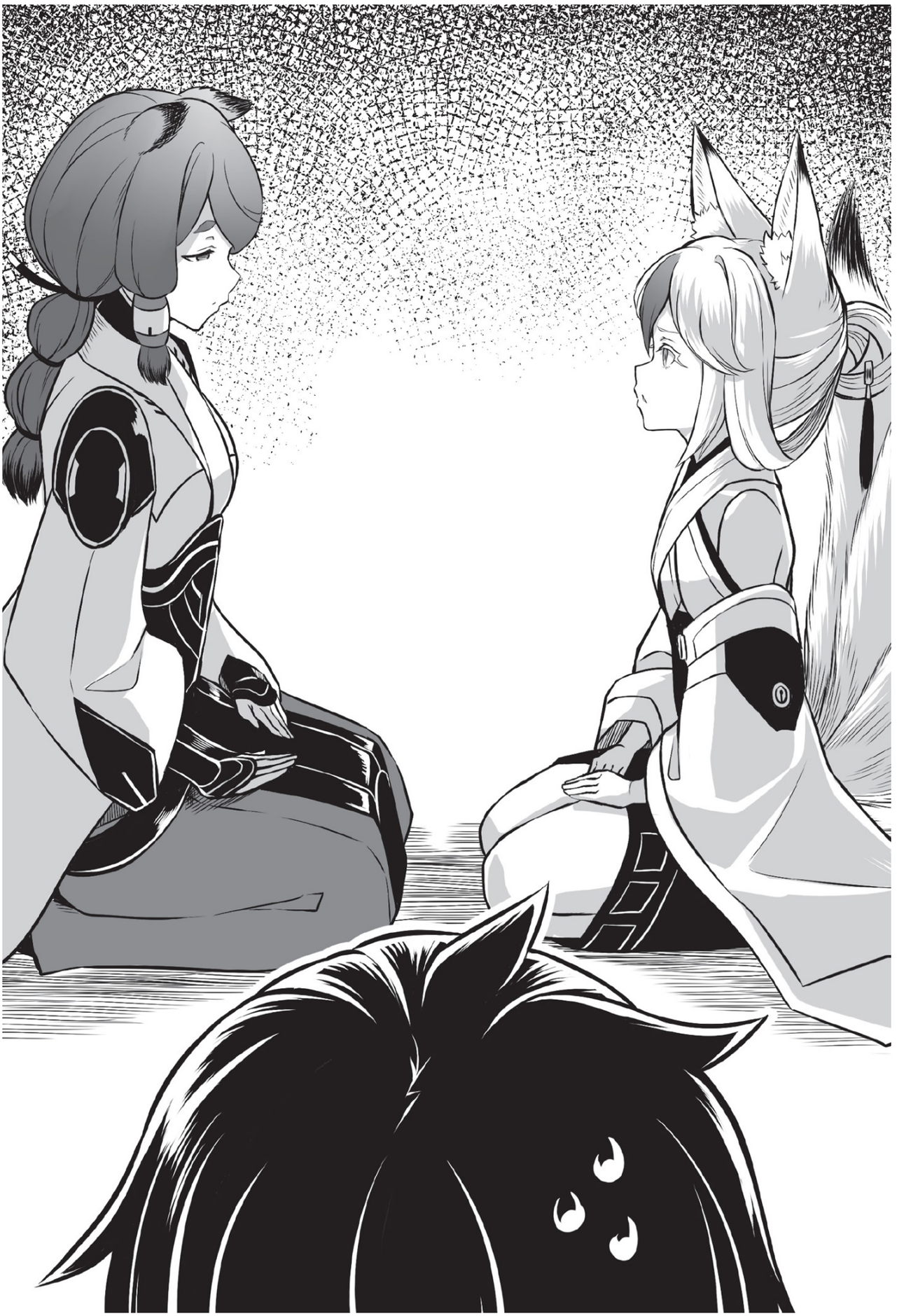
“Um…Lady Konoha entered the dining hall in a tizzy, saying stuff like ‘Master Hiro is improper!’ and ‘You shouldn’t be in a place like this!’ At first, Kugi just listened to her in silence. But then she told Konoha to sit down, and they ended up like this…”

“They’ve been like this since then?”

“Yes…”

Kugi had quelled that textbook warrior, Konoha, through sheer pressure. *She’s tough… I doubt Kugi would ever get mad at me, but I should still be careful not to do anything that upsets her.*

“Uh…Kugi? Um…I think she’s had enough.”



“My lord, Lady Konoha confessed to me that she adopted an unacceptable attitude toward you. As a shrine maiden, I cannot overlook such behavior.”

“Uh…well, yeah, she did suddenly pull away my bedclothes… But I can’t really disagree with her calling my way of life impure. I guess she was a bit rude to invade my private space during my personal time, but I think she’s reflecting on her actions. So could you let her off the hook, for my sake?”

Kugi hesitated. “If that is what you desire, my lord. But there will not be a second chance, Lady Konoha. Should such an event occur again, I will come for you with all my might. Do not forget that.”

“Eek…! Y-yes. Thank you for sparing me, Sir Hiro.”

Konoha shriveled under Kugi’s glare like a frog being gazed at by a snake. She lowered her head and planted it on the ground in a perfect dogeza. *It’s a bit strange that Konoha seems frightened of Kugi. Konoha would definitely win if they fought, right? From how she’s reacting, maybe I’m mistaken. Has Kugi got some psionic ability that terrifies even Konoha? After all, Kugi’s specialty is the second magic, telepathy. If she got serious, could she wield some telepathic attack capable of bringing even Konoha to her knees? That’s the only reasonable explanation.*

“More to the point, I’m hungry,” I said. “While I make up with Konoha, can you get us some food?”

“Yes, my lord.” Kugi responded with a cheerful smile, then fixed Konoha with an emotionless glare. “Lady Konoha, you understand, don’t you?”

“O-of course.”

At that point, Kugi walked quietly toward the back of the dining hall where the Steel Chef 5 was set up.

“I’m not that mad, so don’t worry. Did I just save you by a hair’s breadth?” I asked as I offered Konoha a hand.

She gulped, took my hand, and stood up. “By a hair’s breadth indeed… You rescued me right at the edge of the cliff. I’ll say this, since you don’t seem to truly understand: I wouldn’t last a second against her if she got serious.”

“What? Kugi’s that strong? Really?” Mimi asked, just as surprised as I was. I couldn’t even imagine Kugi somehow dominating the monstrously tough Konoha, who was capable of destroying those metal killer spiders easily.

“Really. No matter my distance from her, I wouldn’t stand a chance. Fighting a master of the second magic is no laughing matter. Offensive spells derived from the second magic are…truly terrifying.”

Konoha trembled, her eyes teary, as she seemingly relived a bad memory. Her round ears drooping, she crumpled to the floor and hugged her tail. *Seeing her this scared really tickles my hero instincts.*

“Have you two made up?”

“Pwf?!”

When Kugi suddenly piped up behind us, Konoha literally shot into the air. *Kugi did that on purpose. How mean. She must really be mad.* “I’ve already forgiven her and made up, so you should forgive her too.”

“Yes, my lord,” Kugi said with a smile, setting a food tray down atop the table.

As I sat down at the table, sighing internally. “So, uh…right. Why’d you come wake me up that early anyway?”

“Oh, right. Uh…oh no.” My question must have reminded Konoha of what had unfolded; “I screwed up” was clearly written across her face.

Now what—Before I could finish my thought, Mei made a rare appearance in the dining hall.

“Good morning, Master,” she said. “There is a guest here.”

Guest? I had no plans to receive guests today.

A blonde, red-eyed beauty wearing a gloomy expression appeared behind Mei.

“Colonel Serena? What brings you here?”

“What brings me here…? Lady Konoha?”

Upon being addressed, Konoha shriveled. “M-my apologies, Colonel Serena. I ran into a few problems…that left me unable to

contact you."

Ha ha. I see now. Colonel Serena contacted Konoha about something, and then she charged into my room to tell me, which led to this morning's events.

"Konoha's telling the truth," I said. "We just finished resolving those problems. Sorry to make you come all the way out here."

"Is that so…? May I sit down?"

"Sure. Want breakfast?"

"I'll pass. I'm not feeling hungry at the moment…but I will take some tea."

"No problem. Mei."

"Yes, Master."

As I watched Mei prepare tea, I observed Serena out of the corner of my eye. She seemed less energetic than usual. *Is what Konoha told her yesterday weighing on her? That was pretty crazy stuff, and if we really do discover such an intelligent life-form, it'll open a can of worms.*

"Thank you for waiting," Mei said, handing a cup of tea to Serena.

"Thank you."

By the way, the meal Kugi had brought to me today consisted of a large serving of "white rice" as the largest dish, plus stir-fried "meat" and "vegetables," an "omelet," and boiled "vegetables" as side dishes. It was a big combo—it was only missing the miso soup—and was a bit heavy for breakfast, but Elma and I had gone pretty hard the previous night.

"That's quite a large morning meal," Serena said.

"I'll work out after this. Even if I wasn't going to, a proper breakfast improves your overall performance throughout the day. So what'd you want Konoha to tell me about?"

Since Colonel Serena had already come herself, the matter had to be pretty urgent. Even including the time I'd spent in the shower, a full hour had yet to pass.

Colonel Serena struggled, but eventually squeezed out the words "Lend me Kugi."

Huh? What's going on…? "If you want me to agree to that, you'll have to at least explain why."

"I will. Yesterday, our research team spent the entire day examining that sphere. We made some progress on our material analysis, but we haven't yet even discovered any clues as to how to communicate with it."

"Makes sense. The Empire's scientists have practically zero knowledge in the field of psionic technology, so expecting them to figure that thing out in a single day is a bit too much, right?"

"Yes, but if we're hoping to establish contact with whatever being controls these spheres, I at least want some idea of how to communicate with it. I consulted our advisor, Konoha, and she suggested we seek the help of Kugi, who is an expert in telepathy. I asked Konoha to inform you of my request, but that seemingly wasn't successful." Colonel Serena glanced over at me.

So that's why Konoha barged into my room this morning? Well, it's not as though I really minded. "I have no objections, so long as you pay Kugi what she's worth. But for safety's sake, Mei or I have to accompany her. Those two points—and Kugi being willing—are my demands. What do you think, Kugi?"

"All right… Since my lord isn't against it, I am likewise not opposed to lending Colonel Serena a hand. That said, I am ultimately a user of the second magic—not a technical expert—so I'm not sure I can be much help. If you wish my assistance despite that, I am fine with trying."

"Of course I'm all right with that. Just hearing you agree takes a significant weight off my shoulders," Serena said, her mouth actually curving upward a little.

I couldn't help pitying her; the pressure she was under didn't allow her to smile or feel relief. "You can compensate Kugi directly through her bank account. I'll be coming along, so can we wait until I finish eating? I'll have our two engineers come too as a bonus."

"I won't be compensating them."

"Well, I can't help feeling that you'll want to pay for their services before this is all over," I said, sending Tina and Wiska a

message on my terminal. *Oh—I should probably bring* that *along too. It might come in handy.*

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"I've seen the exterior countless times, but now I'm actually entering," Tina remarked.

"I wonder whether they'll let us see the engine room?" Wiska mused.

An hour after the conversation with Colonel Serena, I took Kugi, Konoha, Tina, and Wiska on a trip to the Pirate-Hunting Unit's flagship, the *Lestarius*. Three of us wore our usual clothes, but Tina and Wiska were fully decked out, on top of carrying a ton of luggage.

By "decked out," I mean in the stuff they used for engineer work. They wore their usual jumpsuits and had various tools, data tablets, and specific materials, as well as the special thing I'd asked them to bring along. They hadn't brought weapons, though. After all, they weren't even combatants.

"Sorry to make you deal with Colonel Serena's sudden request, Kugi."

"It's nothing, my lord. Being useful is the greatest of honors," Kugi said as she perked up her ears and puffed out her chest with a "Hmph!" Her three fluffy tails were also swinging gently.

What a good, industrious girl. Next to Kugi, Konoha walked obediently. *It seems like Kugi's lecture hasn't worn off yet.*

After walking a bit, we finally arrived at the extra-large hangar where the *Lestarius* was docked. I showed the security gate my ID, and it let us through. This was a high-security zone, so simply hanging around without permission was grounds for arrest. If you resisted, you'd get yourself shot at by laser rifles; even if you dealt with the sentry, it wouldn't be long before tough, heavily armed men and women in power armor would show up to deal with you.

It really went without saying, but in the worst-case scenario, the guns of the *Lestarius* or other military vessels nearby might even

turn on you. This was one place where I'd absolutely refuse to try fighting, however much someone offered me.

"Hello there, Captain Hiro. Thank you for coming."

"Oh—Lieutenant Robertson. Thanks for coming to show us around in person."

Colonel Serena's second-in-command, Lieutenant Robertson, had been awaiting us on the ramp of the *Lestarius*. Serena should have returned to the ship by now; she must've been busy with other matters.

"Thanks for having us," Tina said.

"We'll be in your care," Wiska said.

As the dwarves greeted Robertson, Kugi and Konoha lowered their heads silently. Then, done with greetings, Robertson immediately guided us inside the *Lestarius*.

"This is my first time entering the hatch," I noted.

"The bridge, reception room, officers' mess hall, and meeting spaces are all in the center block, so you haven't had a reason to come down here. The lower section mainly contains crew living spaces and storage rooms for materials."

"Yeah. Not anywhere I'd have a reason to go."

I had a few friends among the *Lestarius*'s crew. Alongside Mimi and Elma, I'd been employed as their instructor in pirate hunting for a while. But that didn't mean I was close enough to visit those crew members' quarters. Your room was your own private sanctuary, whether on a spaceship or within a spacefaring structure like a colony, and personal space was often considered a luxury. Even among people who were close to each other, inviting someone into that personal domain was rare, though I didn't quite understand such feelings myself. My crew had access to a gigantic lounge and training room as well as large personal quarters, so from society's perspective, I was an extremely benevolent captain who provided his crew with top-tier living conditions.

"Our destination's just ahead. Hopefully there won't be explosions today."

"Wait—what'd you just say?"

At practically the same moment Lieutenant Robertson opened the research area's air lock, we were assaulted by an explosive sound and a pressure wave.

"Bwugh!"

"Whoa!"

"Whoa there."

"Wah!"

Lieutenant Robertson and I stood our ground, bracing ourselves against the pressure. Tina and Wiska were carrying a lot of heavy equipment that stabilized them, and Konoha did something that protected herself and Kugi.

"Again...?" said Robertson.

"My ears feel weird now..." I complained. "Aah...aah..."

Neither Robertson nor I were hurt, but my ears felt a little strange. Was that from a sudden change in pressure in an enclosed environment? *Lestarius*'s air-control system, damage-control system, and other life-support systems must've saved us from suffering serious injury.

"Is it always like this?"

"Unfortunately," Robertson sighed as he brushed dust off his uniform and hair. Having been at the front of our group, he'd suffered the worst of the explosion.

Two people who appeared to be researchers were arguing with each other in the ruined—that was the only way to describe its state—research laboratory. Around them floated spheres with damaged mechanical arms, likely some type of robotic assistants, that were hurriedly cleaning the place.

"I told you the shield-strength estimate was too low. Look at this mess. You're in for a scolding if Colonel Serena or Lieutenant Robertson finds out."

"I admit my estimate was too low, but nobody was hurt, and the equipment's barely damaged. We obtained valuable data too, so I think it was worth it."

I take it the scientists and researchers here are the eccentric type, eh? They remind me of a certain quirky, long-haired scientist who looked

good in glasses. I wonder how Dr. Shouko' s doing these days. She's surprisingly clumsy, and kind of an airhead, so it wouldn't surprise me if she's gotten herself in some kind of trouble…

"So, Lieutenant Robertson, what do you think?" one researcher —a woman—asked.

"Explain…in detail. While I'm still calm."

I sense Lieutenant Robertson emitting the aura of an enraged bear. Wait—how come it feels like that researcher's staring at me?

The woman in question wore some kind of strange mask, perhaps required for her experiments, so I couldn't tell what she looked like. She was pretty tall—about my height—and a bulge unique to women practically burst from her lab coat's chest area. That was how I knew the researcher was female, but nothing else about her helped me to identify her.

"I didn't expect to see you here," the female researcher said to me. "Long time. Wait—these aren't the same girls who were with you last time." She walked over to me briskly and stared.

Huh? I can't tell for sure, because of her mask, but is she glaring at me? "Uh…who are you? Wait—don't tell me it's really you, Dr. Shouko?"

I still had doubts, but her voice was far too similar to the person I'd just been thinking about.

"It *is* me! I can't believe you didn't recognize me! Oh, right… I forgot I was wearing this mask."

The researcher took off the mask. That done, the person standing before me was indeed Dr. Shouko, who I'd first met in the Arein System. Her long, thick light-brown hair, and the somewhat tacky glasses that hid her slightly tired eyes, were exactly as I remembered.

"It's been a long time, Hiro," she said. "I've heard lots about your exploits."

"It really *has* been ages… But why are you here?"

It made no sense. When had she begun working for the military? And what was she doing *here* specifically? When we met in the Arein System, she'd worked as a doctor for Inagawa Technologies. I recalled her mentioning that she was primarily a

researcher, but that didn't explain why she was on the *Lestarius* studying those spheres.

"Well, this was a chance to advance my career! After transferring to the military, I somehow found myself all the way out here at an edge world! Enough about me—can you answer a few questions of mine?"

"Sure. Mimi and Elma are back on the ship. The three of us aren't much use when it comes to technology. I'm just playing chaperone to my crew today as the ship's captain."

"Oh…? I see…" Dr. Shouko mumbled as she looked at the mechanic twins, Kugi, and Konoha in turn. Then she faced me again. "Seems like you haven't changed."

"I'm not quite sure what you're insinuating, but no, I haven't changed."

Dr. Shouko laughed, then slapped me on the butt.

"Ow!" *Please don't do that; it brings back bad memories…*

"It seems there's no need for introductions," Robertson muttered, watching us with interest.

Smiling mischievously, Dr. Shouko replied, "Hiro and I already know each other, but I've yet to meet these young ladies, so let me introduce myself. I'm Shouko, a scientist affiliated with Inagawa Technologies in the Arein System. That's where I first met Hiro. I'm currently working as a civilian researcher here aboard the *Lestarius*. Nice to meet you all."

***

"Let's put my personal situation aside for now and get down to business," Dr. Shouko continued. "After all, we're all busy people."

"That's true."

"Oh, right—that guy over there getting strangled by Lieutenant Robertson is Wells. He's a civilian researcher too—a designer from Eagle Dynamics."

"Oh, Eagle Dynamics? We have some of their combat bots on our ship."

Tina and Wiska usually used those as improvised maintenance bots, because “access to the data used by maintenance bots produced by the same outfit makes them highly interchangeable,” or something to that effect.

“Knowing you, I bet you bought some expensive toys,” Dr. Shouko told me.

“All the bots are fully armed and have their own automatic maintenance systems.”

“That *does* sound expensive.” Dr. Shouko laughed into her hand.

If you’re trying to control your laughter, you’re not doing a good job.

“So I heard that someone with psionic powers was coming here,” she continued. “Don’t tell me that referred to you?”

“That’s…not entirely wrong, but today’s star is Kugi. She’s a crew member of mine from the Holy Verthalz Empire, and she’s an expert in telepathy. And this is Konoha. She’s also from the Holy Verthalz Empire, and her specialty is psychokinesis, which involves the release of power…as far as I understand it. She’s not part of my crew; she’s a Verthalz military officer.”

Dr. Shouko wasn’t familiar with terms like “first magic” or “second magic,” so I’d improvised a general introductory explanation. Using the first magic granted Konoha insane physical abilities and destructive power; that was all I knew about the magic, though, which was why my introduction left a little to be desired.

“Oh? People from Verthalz… I see.” Dr. Shouko immediately approached and circled Kugi, examining her from head to toe. “Is it okay if I touch your ears? Or your tails?”

As forward as ever…

“Um…just my ears,” Kugi replied.

“Thank you. Hm… The skeletal structure is similar to an ordinary human’s, but the skull structure seems very different. Kugi, is your race capable of intercourse with humans?”

“Y-yesh, it is,” Kugi garbled her reply, trembling; her face was beet red.

Dr. Shouko hadn't held back at all when she touched Kugi's ears. *And why did she ask* that *question anyway?*

"Interesting. Is everyone from Verthalz like this? Many of you can use psionic powers, correct? Would you mind providing me with a sample of your DNA?" Dr. Shouko requested, taking Kugi's hand. She also glanced over at Konoha.

"Okay, that's enough," I said. "Get away from her. Control your hands, honored guest."

"Nooo! The key to further human evolution was within grasp!" Dr. Shouko cried dramatically, acting as if the world had just ended. She was only half serious, but that was more than serious enough. If I hadn't stepped in, she might actually have started to extract Kugi's DNA.

"You were the one who said we should get down to business, right, Dr. Shouko? We're getting off topic."

"Oh! You're right. I'm so sorry; my curiosity got the better of me. Let's head over to the specimens. Come with me." Dr. Shouko turned around and began walking.

Wells glared hatefully at us as he input something into a tablet under Lieutenant Robertson's supervision, but I ignored him. As an adult, he had to take responsibility for his own actions.

"We've been trying to communicate with them for a while, but we're completely stuck," Dr. Shouko explained. "We tried using sound, obviously, but they didn't respond no matter what wavelength we used."

We passed through a protective barrier and entered a large room.

"Wow... This is really something."

"We were granted quite a work area," Dr. Shouko agreed. "The equipment's top-notch too. The Imperial Fleet is sure wealthy."

Within that large room were over twenty of the objects being researched, each isolated within its own shielded container. Some rested in their sphere state, while others had transformed into spider mode. A few slashed mindlessly at the shields containing them with their scythe-like limbs.

“The ones that ain’t movin’ ain’t too scary. The ones smackin’ the containers are pretty menacing, though,” Tina said.

“That’s true. Still, they won’t break those shields, however hard they try,” Wiska said.

“The material these things are made from is really something,” Dr. Shouko remarked. “Its resistance to directed-energy weapons is unprecedented. After analyzing the material, we’ve determined that it possesses a unique, never-before-seen crystal structure. It transmits energy extremely efficiently. If you hit it with high-output lasers, or expose it to plasma-level heat, the material will disperse the energy throughout itself.”

“In laymen’s terms…?”

“Directed-energy weapons generally focus an enormous amount of heat in one spot, so the target disintegrates, explodes, or caves in on itself. But the material these spheres are made of takes that heat and spreads it across its surface, effectively nullifying the attack.”

“I think I get it,” I said. She meant that the material forcibly turned targeted attacks into dispersed attacks. Well, that was probably close enough. “It’s kind of like a physical version of an energy shield.”

“That’s a good comparison! If you used this material as ship plating, the craft would be incredibly resistant to directed-energy weapons, but the tradeoff would be the entire ship falling apart immediately if its limits were exceeded. Just like how shields go down completely once they’re exhausted.”

“That material still sounds pretty useful.”

Even if you didn’t want to use it as plating, its unique characteristics could be beneficial in plenty of ways. After all, overheating machinery was an eternal problem that people had yet to solve.

“If we can find a way to reproduce this material, it could be used for pretty much anything. It’s a little softer and weaker than existing plating material, but I agree, its special characteristics more than make up for that.”

While explaining more about the material, Dr. Shouko led us in front of a sphere that had transformed into a combat-mode spider yet wasn't moving.

"This is the quietest specimen we have. That's part of the problem; it just stays still and doesn't respond at all to our attempts to communicate."

I gazed at the thing on the other side of the bluish-white shield. It was my first time looking carefully at one of the spiders. It had six legs and was entirely black, its plating—or carapace—smooth and glossy.

"Come to think of it, maybe those things do communicate through sound. They scream in combat," I noted.

"Oh, the Imperial Fleet marines reported that too. And, following a scan, we detected what looked like degenerated vocal organs. But we've yet to observe them using sound to communicate with each other."

As Dr. Shouko and I conversed, Kugi stared at the mysterious being. As for the twins, they were scurrying around, examining it from multiple angles.

"Think you can talk to it?" I asked Kugi.

She hesitated. "My apologies, my lord. I tried, but it rejected me. It said that I'm not one of them."

"If it rejected you, that means you got a response from it," said Dr. Shouko. "That could be called progress. Good, good."

Kugi's ears had drooped as she apologized, yet for some reason, Dr. Shouko seemed very satisfied with the result of her attempt. I understood why Kugi was disappointed, but why did Dr. Shouko seem so happy?

"I don't see the 'progress,'" I told her.

"Well, we've now learned that these things communicate using the same thought waves as psionic ability users! That's quite sufficient. Still, this does raise other problems. It means that people without psionic abilities, like us, won't be able to communicate with these creatures without some kind of psionic amplification material."

"Which is why I prepared some. Hey, Tina!"

“Okay—here it is. Ah, you’re not allowed to touch it, hon.”

“I know that.”

Spirit silver. If I touched it, it’d shatter. Something to do with me being too powerful. I’d already destroyed a relic made of the stuff that was on display in a museum; it was best that I stay away from it.

“‘Prepared’? Huh? What do you mean?”

“I had the opportunity to visit the Leafil System a while back. Elma’s an elf, right?”

“Oh, that’s true. So that’s why you visited the elves’ homeland. But I heard that this material is strictly regulated.”

“Well, a lot happened there. I’m on good terms with the elves in that system now.”

“Ha ha… I won’t dig any deeper for now, but I’d love to hear more another time.”

“Sure.”

As Dr. Shouko and I talked, Tina set the suitcase she carried on the ground and unsealed it. The second she did, the stationary sphere rushed closer.

“Whoa!”

“Oh my!”

It got as close as it could without touching the shield, then seemed to stare at us—no, at the contents of the case Tina had just unsealed. Looking around, I saw that the other spheres were clearly facing this way too. Even the ones that had been attacking their containers’ shields stopped what they were doing and looked over.

“Things are getting interesting,” Dr. Shouko said with a mischievous smile.

I don’t like that look on your face…

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After confirming that the spheres reacted to the psionic amplification material, we took a moment to organize and discuss

what we knew. Deciding on a plan of action was key to efficient progress.

"For now, we're aware that these objects communicate telepathically, and that they're very interested in the spirit silver."

"Yup, they're interested. But how come? You think they wanna eat it?" Tina asked.

"*Can* those things even eat?" Wiska asked in turn.

I wanted to know the answer too. *Looking at them, I didn't see anything that would function as eyes. I doubt they have mouths either. But given that they can transform from spheres into spiders, maybe those organs are hidden somewhere too.*

"Kugi, Konoha, have you two got anything to share?"

"Psionic amplification materials are very rare," Konoha answered, "and can only be obtained in certain locations. There's an 80 to 90 percent chance that these living terminals were created for manual labor, so they likely respond to the presence of rare resources. Perhaps the unit controlling them requires such materials."

I see. Quite a straightforward, simple answer. "If so, we might be able to use them as bargaining chips. That's good news."

"If we want to negotiate, I think we need to find a way to communicate with these things first," Dr. Shouko said.

"That's the main issue. It's not something I'm proud of, but I know absolutely nothing about psionic technology," Wells—a young man with freckles and a very unique hairstyle—said with an exaggerated shrug. After getting chewed out by Lieutenant Robertson, he'd had to write a formal apology; he must just have finished. "It'd be insane to go from knowing *nothing* to creating technology capable of communicating with these things and translating what they want! I've got no idea where to even start on that."

"Thanks to my main job, I do know a little about psionic abilities," Dr. Shouko said, "but my specialties are genetic enhancement and nanomachine engineering. I'm familiar with some materials science, but nothing related to mechanical engineering, so don't ask me to design anything mechanical."

“I majored in materials science too. But you girls over there are engineers, right? Could you design a mechanical device?”

“I guess it depends,” Tina replied. “If there’s a clear enough direction, we could probably make something that’d work.”

Wiska added, “I’ve done some research into psionic amplification materials, and I don’t think that using them to make a device like that would prove too problematic. But creating a thought-wave-based transmission protocol from scratch *would* be quite a task.”

“I think we could figure something out there,” said Dr. Shouko. “Nanomachine engineering covers the development of that kind of structure. If we combine that protocol with a language implant, that might take care of the translation portion to boot.”

The researchers and engineers were having a very spirited technical discussion, whereas Kugi, Konoha, and I—who had zero experience in this department—were effectively becoming mere decorations.

“This tea is quite good, my lord,” Kugi said.

“The automatic cookers aboard Imperial Fleet ships aren’t great overall, but I did hear that they make good tea. I think the guys who did our ship inspection mentioned that. Actually, was it Colonel Serena who said it?”

“I see. I did hear that the Empire’s citizens value teatime highly. We enjoy tea as well, but not nearly to the extent that the Empire does.”

I’d never paid much attention to it before, but Mimi and Elma did drink tea or something similar when the opportunity presented itself, while Tina and Wiska didn’t. I figured there really was a slight cultural difference between the Empire and dwarves.

“All right,” Konoha interjected. “Sir Hiro, have you considered undergoing training?”

“Training? You mean for my psionic abilities?”

“Yes. Given your talents, if you undergo training, you should become quite powerful.”

“Ah… To be honest, I had a bit of a traumatic experience that was related to that.” I glanced at Kugi.

I'd struggled a lot while learning to create a mental barrier. Still, I did say that I was open to further training. *I'm still doing my normal training, as well as Mei's brutal sword training… But I guess training my psionic abilities isn't nearly as bad as Mei's training, which literally makes me cough blood. I already learned to create a mental barrier, so any further training shouldn't be nearly as painful or traumatizing.*

"If you desire, I will help you train, my lord. I'm an official shrine maiden of the Divine Ministry, and a certified instructor," Kugi said, placing a hand on her chest with pride.

The way her ears stand up when she's proud is so cute. It was something I'd only begun learning recently, since she usually acted servile around me, but Kugi was actually pretty playful and childish at times.

"What exactly do I have to do?"

"Trainees usually need to do basic exercises to increase their psionic capacity…but there's no need for you to do that. The next step will be singling out the magic you have an affinity for… But in your case, there's no need for that either. So should we just jump right to practical application?"

"When you put it like that, it sounds scary."

After some discussion, we decided that I'd practice basic psychokinesis—telekinesis—under Konoha's instruction. Telekinesis was a way of moving things without physically touching them; depending how you utilized it, it could also destroy things. It was considered an advanced first-magic ability, but apparently it shouldn't be a problem for me.

Konoha took out a coin from somewhere—it was my first time seeing an actual coin in this universe—and we began training. After some practice, I succeeded in controlling the coin.

"Hey, you three. There's—wait, what're you doing?" Dr. Shouko asked.

"Hand power training."

Brushing off her question, I continued to focus on moving Konoha's coin. Right now, it was revolving at high speed in the middle of the space between my hands.

“Now that I think about it, your answer earlier made it sound like you can use psionic abilities, Hiro,” Dr. Shouko mused.

“When we first met, I didn’t tell you, but I *was* already capable of using some sort of strange power at that point. I just didn’t know what exactly it was.”

“I see… Oh, I almost got derailed again. Now that I’ve talked with Tina and the others, we’d like your input on something: Once we enter the system those spider things came from, will it be safe to keep them aboard the *Lestarius* in an awakened state? Couldn’t it potentially be dangerous? We wanted your opinion.”

Dr. Shouko’s question made a lot of sense. Those things clearly communicated through telepathy, so they might reconnect with their control unit the instant the *Lestarius* reached the target system.

“Under the right conditions, thought waves do bypass time and space,” I mused. “I’m not sure what their maximum output is, but there’s a good chance they’ll be able to reach each other within the same star system.”

“I see… Then we should probably find a way to isolate the thought waves they release before we enter the system they came from. I’ll need to report this to the colonel.” Dr. Shouko casually walked back to Tina and the others, saying, “Bad news, bad news!”

The first solution to pop into my head was pretty vicious: *Why can’t we just render them incapable of sending out signals by destroying them all?*

***

As the researchers and engineers resumed talking about technical matters, Konoha and Kugi occasionally answered questions posed to them. As for me, I kept practicing psychokinesis, resting now and then while watching them out of the corner of my eye. They apparently wanted to add spirit silver to a measuring device and a shield emitter to create a thought-wave measuring tool and thought-wave disruption shield respectively. They’d decided to create such a disruptor rather than trying to cut off the

creatures' thought waves completely after Kugi told them that fully blocking thought waves was close to impossible. It was more realistic either to counterbalance them with the inverse wavelength or smother them with a stronger wave. Fortunately for us, the spheres all used either the same wavelength or wavelengths within a fixed range for thought transmissions, so canceling their waves out wouldn't be too difficult as long as we could measure them.

"Banana," I blurted out.

Tina and Dr. Shouko cut me down mercilessly.

"You have a really stupid look on your face right now, hon."

"Are you doing a stand-up routine?"

What else can I even do in this situation? I don't understand any of this technobabble at all. I'd been hoping to ask Dr. Shouko what she was doing here once the moment presented itself, but she was constantly busy. Kugi and Konoha were now wearing odd, improvised helmets and measuring telepathic waves or something, so I was the only one here with no assigned role.

"Hiro, whatever you do, stay away from us. Okay?" Wiska said.

"Yeah. If you ruin these precious materials, it'll be a disaster," Wells added.

I'd been forbidden from approaching the area where they were molding spirit silver. I was also banned from the spot where spirit silver-imbued devices were being tested. That meant the only places I was free to go within the lab were the entrance area and lobby.

"Oh, right—should I just invoice the colonel for all this spirit silver?" I asked.

"Yes. I told her about it already, and she agreed to cover it," Dr. Shouko replied. "She did complain about the price, though."

"Wait, what? I don't recall specifying a price."

"Oh, sorry, hon," Tina said. "I did that for you."

She'd apparently charged fifty thousand Ener per kilogram. There had been five one-kilogram ingots in the suitcase, so that meant two hundred and fifty thousand Ener.

"Did you overcharge her...?" I asked uncertainly.

“Spirit silver’s market price is just super high,” she explained. “Leafil doesn’t export much of it, so the cost keeps goin’ up. Market value right now is thirty-nine thousand Ener per kilogram. Since we’re in an outermost region, I added a 30 percent surcharge, then rounded down to fifty thousand.”

“A 30 percent surcharge? That’s a steep price hike,” Dr. Shouko commented, giggling.

Tina simply shrugged with a straight face. “I think I should’ve charged more. If hon hadn’t happened to have spirit silver on hand already, they’d be completely stuck. We didn’t charge transport fees, either. If ya think about it, the price we’re chargin’ is nothin’ much. Given how much it costs to operate this fleet for a single day, they owe us one.”

“I see…” I said. “Tina, this is the most impressed I’ve ever been with you.”

“We’ll need to have a talk about that later, hon… I guess there’re some things ya just never forget.”

Some things you just never forget, eh? Although Tina and Wiska lived together now, they’d been raised in different environments. Tina had been brought up in a rather…unpleasant neighborhood; she must’ve acquired her negotiation skills there.

“You’ve got a very competent crew on your hands, Hiro.”

“That I do. All I’m good at myself is fighting, so I have to count on the others for everything else. Oh, right—we’re still lacking a doctor. Interested? We have a mothership with plenty of space now, and we could prep a clinic and research lab for you.”

“You shouldn’t invite someone so casually. They might take you seriously.”

“You’re welcome to join us any time, Dr. Shouko. You’re already somewhat familiar with my situation, after all.”

“I’ll think about it.” Her mouth curved up in a smirk.

In all seriousness, she *was* a great doctor, and also seemingly an expert in nanomachine technology. She really could be quite an asset for us.

And unlike when I’d first met Dr. Shouko, I possessed the *Black Lotus* at this point; it would have ample room for both her quarters

and a research lab and clinic if needed. A lot had changed since the time I'd roamed the galaxy in only the *Krishna*. My crew was entirely female, so having a doctor aboard who could oversee their physical condition and offer mental support would be extremely helpful. I'd benefit from her services too.

"I overheard your discussion! If you're hiring, how about me?"

Wells had sneaked over at some point, and now he was selling himself in a loud voice. I'd noticed him approaching, but Dr. Shouko and Tina must not have; they both jumped at his sudden appearance. It was cute that they reacted the exact same way.

"What services could you provide to our crew, Mr. Wells?"



“Um…I might be able to improve your ships’ plating if we successfully discover a new material.”

“I think our two mechanics could already handle that, Mr. Wells…but I wish you luck in your future endeavors.”

“Please don’t use that phrase. My heart can’t take it anymore.”

Gloominess emanated from Wells as he began lamenting the woes of a materials-science researcher. He had many complaints about the corruption of the job market. *Wells has the skills to have been chosen for a top-secret military operation, so shouldn’t it be easy for him to find whatever job he wants?* I decided just to ask him about that.

Apparently, it wasn’t that simple. “Well, this isn’t really a flattering way to put it, but I’m here due to connections,” he admitted. “My friend—well, childhood friend—is pretty high up in the military. But although I did get in through connections, I’m not a useless leech.”

The others nodded at his words, which meant that his skills must be the real deal.

“Well, I get that things haven’t been easy for you. But our crew really wouldn’t have a use for a materials-science researcher.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Wells sighed deeply. “I need to produce results here, then find a way to sneak into the military’s research division.”

Researchers sure have it tough. “Speaking of results, what’s our progress?”

“We’re making headway. The thought-wave disruptor should work. The logic behind it checks out, at least.”

“The next step is to go around the ship testing it out.”

“I see. Maybe I’ll join you guys, since I’ve got nothing better to do.” *Better than just sitting around here. Anyway, Kugi and Konoha are going along with them too.*

***

Wiska led the way, carrying a very obviously patched-together thought-wave measurement device under one arm. If we detected any thought-wave leaks, we were to contact the research lab and get them to adjust the disruptor. It was a pretty basic task; once we'd confirmed that there were no leaks, we headed to Colonel Serena to give her a progress report.

"You're certain that the disruption device works?" she asked. "If the control unit could make contact with those strange spheres, and the creation and implementation of the disruptor prevents such a thing from happening, the potential risks…"

Her dignified voice echoed through the captain's room. Only three of us were present: Colonel Selena, Dr. Shouko, and myself.

"We did manage to contain the thought waves. For now, at least," Dr. Shouko answered in her usual lackadaisical manner. Not even a colonel of the Imperial Fleet could intimidate her into formality.

"What do you mean by 'for now, at least'?"

"We're working within a pretty good safety margin. Still, there's too much we don't know about the capabilities of those things, so it's hard to guarantee anything," Dr. Shouko replied, both figuratively and literally shrugging off the pressure in Colonel Serena's red eyes.

Serena paused. "Will we be able to communicate with them?"

"Again, no guarantees. They're constantly communicating some sort of information through thought waves, so we have lots of data to work with. But they use an unknown language, and we aren't used to thought-wave communication. We don't have anyone here who specializes in cryptanalysis or alien languages, either. So yeah."

"It's impossible to acquire additional personnel at this time," Colonel Serena said, tapping her forehead as if nursing a headache.

"They're forcing you to handle a bunch of things outside your purview. Must be tough, Colonel."

"I am a military officer." Colonel Serena refused to elaborate further.

The Pirate-Hunting Unit she led had been created, as its name suggested, to target pirates on operations outside the Empire's overall military strategy. From another perspective—like that of the military brass—that meant that they were pawns who could be used to accomplish any task that had somehow been linked to pirate hunting. They'd also once been mobilized to deal with crystal life-forms, an expedition that had no connection to pirates whatsoever. In light of that, the military could seemingly also just ignore all pretense if the situation called for it, sending the Pirate-Hunting Unit wherever they were needed.

"The military's inner workings—I guess you could call them 'military politics'—sound like a drag," Dr. Shouko commented. "But I suppose I shouldn't be so dismissive, since we've been roped into them."

"Indeed," I agreed. "And we can't just sit here on the *Dauntless* conducting research indefinitely, right?"

"Thanks to a certain *someone*, we dealt with the pirates rather quickly," Serena said. "That gives us some breathing room, but my fleet can't simply sit around and do nothing. Even if I stall, we have at most one week—no, less than that."

"That means we've got less than a week to produce some results. We need to figure out a way to talk with an intelligent alien life-form in an unknown language via an unknown method of communication."

"Having their own language doesn't mean they're intelligent life-forms," I noted.

On Earth, stating that every life-form with its own language was intelligent would have meant declaring that, as a rule, birds—and all other creatures communicating with sound—were intelligent life-forms. *I feel like the term "intelligent life-form" is pretty vague in general.*

"What kind of outcome is the military aiming for, anyway? You guys are interested in that plating material, right? You've already got plenty of samples. Can't you just analyze those and be done with it?"

"A military research laboratory in the Wyndas System is also studying that new plating material, so it's only a matter of time until

we achieve a full understanding," Serena said. "The materials to be used to produce the plating are the problem. If the raw materials required to create it are only found on the same planet those spheres come from, then the Empire needs to take control of that planet. Of the entire star system the planet's located in, actually."

"That's why the Pirate-Hunting Unit was sent all the way out here to an edge world? Shouldn't that be a job for the actual army, or at least some specialized division?"

"Yes."

"That's rough... So you were sent here to do what could be called your main duty—dealing with edge-world pirates—but, since you're here already, they also want you find the spheres' source and gather any additional information you can?"

To the military brass, this was essentially killing two birds with one stone—an efficient allocation of resources. But for Colonel Serena, who'd been assigned a job that fell outside her normal duties, it was an absolute nightmare.

Well, although they completely shoved everything onto her, they at least provided her with Konoha as an advisor.

"As if that weren't enough, we're now saying that the control unit might be an intelligent life-form. But I don't think that changes anything, does it?" Dr. Shouko asked, sending me a probing glance. She hadn't been informed of Konoha's theory that a higher-level existence had wiped out the ancient civilization the spheres might've come from. But that wasn't a speculation to be tossed out casually either, so I just shrugged and ignored her question.

"...In any case, if we can't communicate, that's all there is to it," said Serena. "It would be very helpful if you produced results as quickly as possible."

"I think we accomplished the bare minimum already by creating a way to keep their thought waves from leaking. Now all we can do is hope that analyzing the translator-implant database with a cryptanalytic computer produces useful results."

"I pray with all my heart that it does," Colonel Serena mumbled with a glum look.

I really do sympathize.

***

Since we'd already finished with our thought-wave leakage countermeasures and reported to Colonel Serena, we decided to take a break—or rather, well, just call it quits for the day. The plan moving forward was to use the thought-wave measuring device to capture the spheres' communications, then process the collected samples through the translator implant's database.

"We're pretty much just leaving everything up to the computers, although we might mess with the algorithms a little here and there," Dr. Shouko noted.

"We've messed with maintenance-bot algorithms before. This would be on a whole 'nother level, though," Tina said.

"Just imagining what the translation algorithms might look like makes me feel like my head's exploding," Wiska added.

"If you can modify maintenance bot algorithms, I really don't think this'll be all that different."

On our way back to the *Black Lotus*, the researcher and two technicians returned to their technobabble. The three got along surprisingly well. *Is that because they work in similar fields? Whatever the reason is, getting along is a good thing.*

"Are you tired, Kugi?"

"No, my lord. I haven't walked this much in a long time; it was very enjoyable," Kugi said, her expression extraordinarily satisfied. Since her tails were wagging, she really must be enjoying herself. We *had* done a lot of walking as we checked for signs of thought wave leakage. It might be a good idea to go for strolls more often.

"That's good, then. I was worried that using your telepathy might've exhausted you."

"Telepathy of this level is no trouble at all, although *really* using it does exhaust me quickly."

"What do you mean by 'really using it'?"

"It's quite taxing to communicate over long distances or focus communications on a specific group of people. I prefer not to, but

I'm also capable of sending powerful thought waves at someone to knock them out, injure them, or make them do as I say."

"Wow... 'Telepathy' is a pretty broad term for a wide range of uses."

"I don't wish to use it offensively. Still, at times, it's necessary to have a means of protecting oneself."

Now that I thought about it, I realized that Kugi didn't carry around weapons like laser guns. Telepathy *was* her weapon. "Konoha, what about—I guess I don't have to ask."

"I am more suited to physical activities than mental ones," Konoha said, rubbing her forehead with a glum look. She wasn't very good at mental labor or the second magic, so she had to be exhausted.

"By the way," asked Dr. Shouko, "are you sure it's okay for me to join you guys today?"

She was also calling it quits for the day, so I'd invited her back to the *Black Lotus*. We could offer her a better meal than she'd get on the *Lestarius*, and I was sure Elma would be willing to open a good bottle for her.

"No prob! Knowin' hon, he won't turn away a beauty like you."

"Stop making it sound like I'll take anyone with good looks," I protested. "I don't accept just anyone."

"Ah ha ha! True, you're quite cold toward Colonel Serena," Wiska responded.

"She's not the only one I've refused."

Nya of Nyatflix, one of the reporters who'd boarded the *Black Lotus* in the past, was quite a beauty, but I'd firmly refused all her advances. I'd also never take in a gaudy poisonous snake like Mary.

"You're definitely welcome, Dr. Shouko, so don't worry about that. I'm sure Mimi and Elma will be surprised to see you."

"It makes me happy to hear that," Dr. Shouko said, her lips curving up in a smirk. All my interactions with her in the past had been business-related, so seeing this side of her was pretty novel.

***

“Huh? Is that you, Dr. Shouko?” Elma asked.

“Why are you here?” Mimi added.

Dr. Shouko’s sudden appearance had completely bewildered them both. *That’s only natural. Dr. Shouko should be working at a hospital in the Arein System, yet for some reason she’s here joining us on the* Black Lotus*.*

Dr. Shouko greeted them with a wave. “Yo… It’s been a long time, you two. Mm… Your complexions are good. I’m glad to see that you’re both healthy.”

As Mima and Elma stared at Dr. Shouko, I practically saw the question marks above their heads. Then they looked over at me, as if to demand an explanation.

“Dr. Shouko’s one of the researchers working aboard the *Lestarius*. But I don’t know why she’s on that ship or working for the military, so don’t ask me,” I told them, passing the baton to Dr. Shouko.

“I don’t have a reason worth bragging about… And it’s not something I want to admit directly to you sober,” Dr. Shouko said with an awkward smile.

“Admit” to me? What’s that supposed to mean? The others stared at me again; I shook my head in response. *This isn’t my fault. I didn’t do anything that warranted such a suggestive response. Or at least nothing that warranted Dr. Shouko changing her entire life trajectory.*

Mei’s voice shattered the awkward atmosphere. “How about you discuss this over a meal, everyone? I’ll prepare it.”

Dr. Shouko looked over at Mei, asking, “And you’re…?”

“Pleased to meet you, honored guest. I am a Maidroid named Mei.”

“Ah, yeah. Nice to meet you. I’m Shouko.”

“Understood. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Ms. Shouko. I will now go to the dining hall to prepare a dinner party.”

Mei departed toward the dining hall. After watching her leave, Dr. Shouko turned to face me. *What is it?*

“That Maidroid… She said her name is Mei? She looks a lot like me.”

“You think so…?”

Now that I thought about it, she kind of did, although Dr. Shouko’s chest was bigger. *Dr. Shouko rivals even Mimi in that department, after all.*

“Yeah, she has long hair and wears glasses,” I acknowledged. “Her personality’s completely different from yours, though.”

“Hmm? Really? Well, if you say so.”

What’s she implying? Did I unintentionally fulfill the conditions for Dr. Shouko’s romance route at some point…? No way. Impossible, right? Yeah, definitely.

“By the way,” Dr. Shouko added, “is this everyone? Don’t tell me you still have more girls hidden away somewhere.”

“This is everyone. Why’re you treating me like a womanizer…? Actually, don’t answer. At any rate, I’m not like that.”

“Ain’t ya?” Tina teased.

Wiska joined in. “*I* can’t defend you.”

“Um…Master Hiro is a very kind person,” Mimi said.

“If you’re trying to defend hon, you ain’t doin’ a good job.”

“This many is normal for someone of my lord’s caliber.”

“…No comment.” I had no way to refute them; they were right. *Well, except Kugi, maybe. I’ve got no idea what kind of logic she’s operating under. What’d she mean by “this many is normal”? Not that I’m complaining.*

“I see that some people never change, eh, Hiro?”

“A lot of stuff happens when you’re a mercenary, really,” I hedged.

It’s not like I’m purposefully increasing the number of female crew members—okay, maybe I am, but stuff like that just happens by chance. Anyway, you’re welcome to join us, Dr. Shouko. Yeah—we’d love to have you. Say whatever you want; I don’t care at this point.

***

“How do I put this…?” Dr. Shouko muttered, looking around the *Black Lotus*’s clean, spacious dining hall. “This place is very different from how I imagined it.”

“Everyone says that. The reporters, the soldiers who inspected our cargo, and an important dude in the capital all reacted the same exact way.”

“People say mercenary ships are dreary, crude, and—if they’re overly direct—filthy. I designed this one to be the exact opposite of those stereotypes!” Mimi boasted.

In retrospect, Mimi *had* been responsible for turning the *Krishna*’s interior into that of a high-end luxury ship. That, in turn, had set the bar for how the *Black Lotus* would be outfitted, so she wasn’t full of hot air. Of course, I also deserved some credit, since I’d agreed to her suggestions. A pretty, clean, spacious living space was important from a mental health perspective.

“So how’d you end up here, Dr. Shouko?” Elma asked, grabbing a cold beer from the cooler in a corner of the dining hall.

“Uh…yeah, about that… It’s really not easy to talk about,” Dr. Shouko replied, her expression uncomfortable, as she accepted a beer-filled vacuum flask from Elma. It was rare for Dr. Shouko not just to speak her mind, but right now, she was definitely struggling. *The circumstances must be pretty complicated. Money troubles?*

“If you don’t want to talk about it, we won’t force you,” I told her. “But we’ll at least lend an ear if you’re in trouble.”

“No, that’s not the problem… You really are a busybody, aren’t you? Is that how you attracted so many women?”

“Being nice to beautiful women only has benefits,” I quipped. “That was a joke. Anyway, it’s not like we’re strangers. It’s normal that I’d be willing to at least listen to your problems, although whether I’m actually able to help depends on the situation.”

“He says that, but hon always helps out.”

“There aren’t many problems that Hiro can’t resolve.”

That wasn’t true. There were plenty of problems I couldn’t solve. For example, if someone asked me to evacuate all the citizens

of a planet that would explode in three days, there'd be no way I could do it. I didn't think anybody could.

"Ah…well, fine," said Dr. Shouko. "I'll tell you guys, since I'd be ungrateful not to. To tell the truth…"

"To tell the truth…?" I wasn't sure what she meant by about "being ungrateful," but I really did want to know why she was here.

"Well, after you guys left the Arein System, I kind of got curious about what it was like to be a mercenary. I spent some time looking into it, and while reading through some books, I kind of fell in love with the idea. I know doing something like that is a bit embarrassing, given my age…"

"Yeah…?"

I couldn't figure out how to connect the current situation with what Dr. Shouko was telling me. Smart people sometimes arrived directly at a conclusion the way she had, skipping over the thought process. *So, uh…after we left the Arein System, Dr. Shouko fell in love with us—or rather, with the mercenary lifestyle. Or at least with the idea of traveling all around the universe. I understand that much.*

"But how did that result in you working for the Imperial Fleet?"

"That's a long story… Basically, things were going well at work, and I had an opportunity to take extended leave. The Imperial Fleet was recruiting temporary employees, so I applied, thinking that it could serve as a career-advancement opportunity and sightseeing trip. We have a lot of doctor-researchers at Inagawa who specialize in genetic engineering and nanomachine engineering, so the army occasionally sends us that kind of recruitment request. The company benefits because that puts it in the army's good graces, and the employees benefit because they can add military work to their resume. Those employees who go are also paid a good salary and boost their performance reviews significantly. Meanwhile, the military can outsource highly skilled doctor-researchers, so it's a win-win-win situation."

"I see. And you just happened to get assigned to Colonel Serena."

"Yeah, I guess so. I actually applied to be a ship doctor, but after they reviewed my resume, they offered me a research position

instead. In addition to being a doctor, I'm a researcher specializing in genetic engineering and nanomachine engineering. It seems the military thought my knowledge of the latter would be handy in analyzing those spheres. You need to apply materials science in the nanomachine-engineering field, so I suppose things worked out conveniently."

Dr. Shouko shrugged. She'd received a different job than the one she'd applied for, which was ultimately what led us to reunite with her.

"What are the odds that that series of events would lead to us running into each other again? I guess the world *is* a small place."

"Well, it's Hiro, after all."

"Master Hiro, at it again."

"Stop treating me like some anomaly that makes unlikely events happen."

"Given your track record, I don't think you can deny that."

Dr. Shouko giggled at Elma's words. "So is this what the atmosphere here is usually like?" she asked. "And are you suggesting that us meeting again was some act of fate?"

"Not you too," I retorted. "I can't believe I just heard Dr. Shouko use the words 'act of fate.' Are you actually a romantic?"

"I'm enough of a starry-eyed young girl that I left the safety of my company to go work for the military because I fell in love with the mercenary lifestyle."

Sh-she's good. I'd tried to tease her, but it rolled right off. I wasn't foolish enough to touch on her word choice in "starry-eyed young girl." That was a trap; mentioning a woman's age was taboo.

"So what are your plans, for real? If you want to join us, we'd love to have you."

"Hmm... That's a tempting offer. This ship is clean, and it has lots of space and great furnishings. It's probably comfier here than in my company dorm. But I'm still affiliated with Inagawa, so if I wanted to join you, there'd be a ton of paperwork to deal with."

"Mei can help you with that," Wiska said.

“Leave it to me. I promise to provide you with perfect assistance,” Mei responded in a crisp, blank manner. *Yes, I know that “crisp, blank manner” sounds contradictory. But even though Mei’s expression is neutral, she’s leaking a triumphant, proud aura.* Her voice was as deadpan as usual, though, so I myself didn’t understand why I was picking up on that aura.

Wiska and Mei had already begun operating under the assumption that Dr. Shouko would join us, which the good doctor could only respond to with an awkward smile. “In any case, that would have to wait until my current contract finishes. I can’t just ditch a job halfway through, and I owe Inagawa a lot. I’m not going to leave them just like that.”

Contracts are important, and she should *leave her previous employer on good terms, if possible. Besides, if she’s really going to join us, we’ll need time to prepare facilities for her.*

“In that case, after we’re done here, maybe we should stop by the Arein System,” I suggested. “That’s assuming you’re not just being polite, and you actually do mean to join us.”

“Um…that’s… Would you really go that far? I might take that as a serious offer, you know?”

“You should. Medical pods are good enough as a bare minimum, but having a skilled doctor aboard would obviously be better. A little inconvenience is nothing compared to what we’d stand to gain.”

I looked at Mimi and Elma for agreement; the two of them nodded. The twins and Kugi hadn’t witnessed Dr. Shouko’s abilities, but Mimi and Elma had.

“I really *will* take that as an actual offer. You’re sure about this, right?”

“I never go back on my word. Well, I guess sometimes I do, but I won’t here—so don’t worry.” I extended my hand for a handshake.

Dr. Shouko responded with a firm grip. “Okay… I’ll hold you to that, then. Right now, though, we need to deal with the problems in front of us.”

“That’s true.”

Dr. Shouko deciding to join us was cause for celebration, but we needed to take care of the issue with those spheres first and foremost. Not that I could do anything to help with that at the moment.

Chapter 6:
Beyond the Outermost Region

I ENDED UP WAITING AROUND for slightly less than a week, but that was a real trial for me. Why, you ask? Because I was bored. Even if I accompanied Kugi to the research lab, there was nothing for me to do there. We'd already practically wiped out the local pirates, so I had no reason to head out in the *Krishna* either.

Thus, I had Mei act as chaperone for half those days while I hung out with Mimi and Elma. Sometimes we went shopping, but mostly we just lazed around. On days when I didn't go to the lab, I spent the evening and night with Tina and Wiska, and on days I did, with Mimi and Elma.

"So, yeah, I think we found a way to get a general translation of what those spheres are sayin' to each other," Tina reported.

"I see. Glad we're making progress."

"We also ran out of things to do in the second half of the day, so we helped the team out with the research on that plating material," Wiska said. "Dr. Shouko is incredible. She took programs and algorithms produced for nanomachines and applied them for other purposes. She was creative enough to use them for things they weren't even designed for."

"We should learn from her."

The twins and I sat on the sofa with Tina on the right, Wiska on the left, and me in the middle. This had become our standard arrangement whenever we spent time resting together. These two were practically glued to me, and I could feel their body heat warming me up. That must've been why Wiska and Tina set this room's temperature slightly lower than the others. *How thoughtful.*

"How are things between you and Kugi, hon?"

"I could play dumb about how you mean that...but I'd rather not make you say it. Hmm... Well, she's too pure, so it's hard to make a move."

"Ah...I know what you mean. She really is pure," Tina agreed.

“She’s like a flower that isn’t meant to be plucked… Does that make sense?”

“The nuance got through, yes,” Wiska replied.

I wasn’t asking for Kugi to be as forward as Elma or Tina, but I couldn’t help wishing that she was at least more like Mimi or Wiska. However, she was an innocent girl who’d grown up completely sheltered from the universe’s corruption. Whenever we interacted, her pure-girl quality was at full power. She’d say things like “I will fulfill my duties with all I have!” and “I will do whatever you ask of me.” That made it really hard to put a move on her. I wasn’t a free-love devotee, nor a dull loser who refused dishes presented to them, but Kugi’s purity was a little too overwhelming for me.

“You’ll make a move on her eventually,” Tina stated.

“Probably, at some point.”

“It’s hard to say whether you act quickly or slowly… But you took quite a while to make a move on us too.”

“It did take me time to come around to that idea. Forgive me.”

I really had needed to work up my courage before moving in on those two, for various reasons. Once I got past my mental block, however, it hadn’t been a problem anymore.

“Don’t make Kugi wait too long, though. Being excluded hurts,” Tina said.

“I’ll do my best not to,” I told her.

I say that, but unless some opportunity presents itself… No. It’s that kind of thinking that’s preventing me from acting. You don’t wait for opportunities; you make them.

***

It wasn’t me, but Kugi, who created the opportunity. I wasn’t sure whether I should be happy or perplexed.

“Let’s train your psionic abilities, my lord.”

“Train them, you say?”

“Yes.”

Kugi had called me to her room; we faced each other, sitting in the seiza position.

Verthalz really had a lot of cultural similarities to Japan. There was even a mat resembling a tatami in Kugi's quarters. Wearing shoes on a tatami was against the rules in Japan, and it was no different here, so a space near the entrance of her room was reserved for taking off shoes.

When I arrived at Kugi's quarters, I saw a zabuton-like cushion that had clearly been placed there for me, so I went with the flow and sat on it. Kugi sat on the other zabuton directly across from me.

"What exactly do you mean by 'train'? Am I going to meditate?"

"That is an effective method. Meditation involves consciously focusing on the energy gushing within you; it is a good way to develop control. But that would likely be difficult for you at the moment, my lord."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. You have already used powerful abilities such as space-time manipulation and fate manipulation, but you did so unconsciously. If you wish to make use of those abilities consciously, you must first be capable of perceiving your own power."

"I see."

I had continued training with Kugi and Konoha, mostly on telekinesis; I'd also practiced creating the mental barrier that Kugi had taught me to produce. In those two areas, I was currently on par with other beginners, even by Verthalz's standards.

That said, I had yet to receive any training whatsoever in the "third magic"—magic capable of manipulating space-time and fate. I had no idea why holding my breath let me slow down time; I'd been using that ability out of pure instinct. It made sense that I needed to perceive my own power before I could hone my abilities. Controlling or practicing something you couldn't even perceive was impossible.

"I understand your reasoning, but I've got a question."

"Yes, my lord?"

"How come you have a futon prepared?"

I also wanted to ask why she was so lightly dressed. What little she wore was so thin that it was basically see-through. Actually, I knew why. I wasn't an idiot, and I already saw where this conversation was going. Still, I had to ask.

"I *do* have a somewhat proper reason…"

"So you realize that the reason is only *somewhat* proper. Well, let's hear it."

The way she looked down, blushed, and glanced away before finally turning back to face me hit hard. *Please stop. I'm beginning to get embarrassed too.*

"Um…do you remember when I linked our minds through touch, my lord?"

"Of course. Experiences that impactful are rare. I remember it clearly."

She was referring to when we'd first met. She'd appeared out of nowhere, pressed her forehead against mine, and connected our minds while I was still stuck in a daze. While we were linked, she'd confirmed the state of my psionic abilities and performed emergency treatment on the parts of my mind that needed it.

"Erm…doing something like this is optimal for forming a deeper, stronger connection than the one we formed back then."

"It feels strange to hear something like that from a girl like you. You just pitched a fastball straight at me."

Kugi's face was bright red, and I probably wasn't doing much better. Was her embarrassment being transmitted to me telepathically?

"So, uh…why do we need to form a deeper, stronger connection?"

"B-by forming such a bond, we can more deeply perceive each other's presence, strengthen each other's magic, and help control each other's magic, if it comes to that. It greatly increases the scope of possibilities. An additional benefit is that it will allow you to train your psionic abilities much more quickly." Kugi averted her eyes as she said all this, her face still beet red and the ears atop her head twitching nonstop. *Are they twitching out of nervousness? Well, I doubt anyone could remain calm in this situation.*

“So that’s your ‘somewhat proper’ reason?”

“Y-yes.”

All right, let’s stop there. Drawing this out any longer would enter the realm of fetish, and I can’t just walk away after things have escalated this far. “I won’t ask you any more ungentlemanly questions.”

“A-all right… Ah!”

I got onto my knees and approached Kugi, placing my hand on her cheek. Her face was still bright red, and she trembled slightly. First, I needed to get her to relax…

***

A new morning arrived.

“Good morning, my lord.”

I opened my eyes and saw Kugi smiling at me with unprecedented brightness. *Is it just my imagination, or does her skin have more of a glow too?*

“I can’t… I’m going back to bed.”

“Good. Morning. My. Lord,” she repeated in a staccato manner.

I tried to hide by pulling the futon’s blanket over myself, but Kugi yanked it away from me. *Damn, she’s strong.* The innocent blanket would get ripped to shreds if this continued, so I gave up on hiding.

“Good morning, Kugi.”

“Yes. Good morning.”

The smiling Kugi was already properly dressed. I won’t go into detail about what had happened the previous night, but I will say that it felt as though I were dreaming. It was like our minds and bodies had melted together—a potentially addictive experience.

Kugi recovered awfully fast. Is that just because she’s in better shape than me, or does she have more experience doing these things with telepathy? It might be both.

“Notice anything, my lord?”

“What do you mean…? Wait… Huh?”

Until Kugi pointed it out, I hadn’t noticed, but suddenly I became aware of a sixth sense that I hadn’t possessed before. *No —“a sixth sense that I hadn’t* noticed *before” is probably more accurate.* I clearly felt a new sense distinct from the normal five.

“My sensitivity has definitely increased,” I told her.

“Yes. I tuned you thoroughly.”

“Am I some kind of instrument?”

This transcendent sixth sense was difficult to put into words, and I felt it even when I closed my eyes or tried to block it out. I could tell where Kugi was, but it wasn’t limited to just her: I could sense the presence of other living beings too. The sensation from somewhere deeper within allowed me to detect the breath or spark of life.

“This is incredible. It’s kind of confusing too, so I’ll need to get used to it.”

“So long as you acclimate yourself little by little, you should be able to control your abilities as well. But for now, just familiarize yourself with the sensation of this new power within you. If you ever feel anxious, don’t hesitate to come to me for help.”

“Got it. For now…”

“Yes?”

“…I need a shower.”

***

I took a quick shower, then headed with Kugi to the lounge. Most of the other girls were waiting there; when I entered, they looked over immediately. Mimi fidgeted, blushing slightly. Elma also had a slight flush as she glared at me with scornful eyes. Tina was smirking, while Wiska was looking at me, then immediately looking away. Mei and Konoha weren’t there. *Konoha seems to be hiding in her room,* I sensed. I couldn’t tell where Mei was, though, since Maidroids weren’t living beings.

“Morning, everyone.”

“G-good morning, Master Hiro.”

“…Morning.”

“Morning, hon.”

“Good m-morning.”

Their responses felt off. I glanced over at Kugi and saw her sweating profusely, her face red. *How come she’s sweating when we just showered? What’s going on here?* I couldn’t help feeling that something was terribly wrong. From the others’ reactions, I could guess to a degree what it was.

“Did our thoughts leak out, by any chance?” I asked.

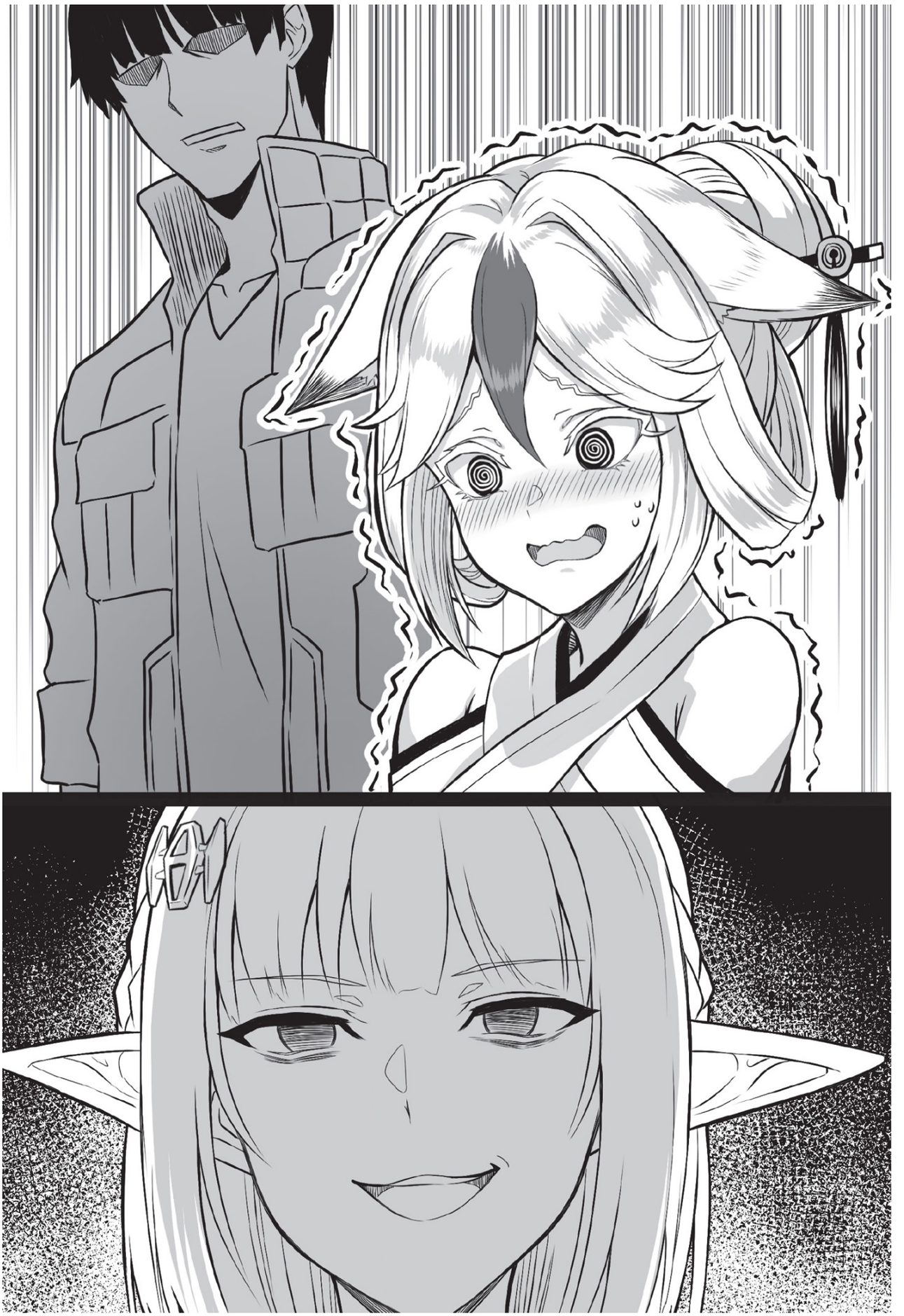
“They more than ‘leaked out.’ It was like you were shooting us with them.”

“We understood the situation, since we knew where they were coming from. But I imagine those who didn’t are extremely confused now.”

“Kugi…?”

“I did my best, but you were far too powerful to contain fully, my lord… Still, I did not expect the result to be this severe…” Her face was turning even redder.

At least, it would be if it weren’t beet red already, I thought. *It seems that when Kugi and I united body and mind last night, the flirting and so on leaked out of the room via telepathy.*



“Hey.”

“Ah! Yes, ma’am?”

I’d been whispering with Kugi near the lounge entrance, not joining the other girls on the sofa, so Elma had interrupted us in an angry tone. *At least, I think it’s angry. Maybe not, but I’m getting that feeling from her right now… Is that a side-effect of Kugi’s so-called “tuning”?*

“We had to endure your lust wave all night,” Elma declared. “Don’t you think we deserve an apology?”

“Lust wave?” *Ha ha ha! Elma’s flair for naming things is pretty unique!* “Please forgive me for the great inconvenience I caused you.”

Sitting down in a seiza position, I bowed my head to the floor in a full dogeza, surrendering without resistance.

“Words aren’t enough to show your sincerity.” Elma got up quietly and approached me.

Her eyes are glazed over! Yikes!

“Yeah,” Tina agreed.

At some point—well, to be honest, I’d noticed her much earlier—Tina had snuck next to me. Now she grabbed my left arm as Elma grabbed my right. *Hold on. You guys are way too strong. I can’t even beat you one on one, let alone two on one!*

“Wait! Calm down!” I exclaimed. “We’re supposed to set off today, so we don’t have time to play—”

“Mimi.”

“Right.”

As Tina and Elma dragged me away, Mimi came over and showed me her tablet screen. *What’s this? Some unknown phenomenon caused indecent behavior to erupt all over the* Dauntless*? “The* Dauntless*’s military police believe an artifact brought aboard caused the phenomenon, and they are currently conducting an extensive search.” I see. So the effect wasn’t limited to the* Black Lotus*—it leaked outside too.*

“Today will likely be complete chaos. I doubt Colonel Serena will set out today, so you should prepare yourself.”

“Please go easy on me.”

Since coming to this universe, I’d trained my body every day, but there were still limits to my endurance. *There’s no way I can beat four people, logically speaking…*

***

The next day, I visited the *Lestarius*’s research lab, where Dr. Shouko greeted me with laughter.

“Ah ha ha ha! Wow! I hear things have been a complete mess since two nights ago,” she declared.

“It’s not a laughing matter… Wait, weren’t you guys affected, Dr. Shouko?”

“We happened to be testing a psionic displacer at that time. Mr. Wells and I were completely focused on our research. We had no idea what was going on outside!”

“That at least proves the device we made works as intended. Good news for us,” Wells said, shrugging.

I don’t sense disappointment from him. Doesn’t he have any feelings for Dr. Shouko? She’s quite beautiful.

As we chatted, more guests entered the lab: Colonel Serena and Lieutenant Robertson.

I see… So this is what their presence feels like. I remember it. How come there’s such a ferocious aura enveloping Serena? Not only does it feel like she could draw her sword at any moment, the veins on her forehead are bulging. Come on…smile a bit.

“If you dare say something stupid, I’ll stuff a plasma grenade in your mouth and sew it shut,” Serena snapped.

“Aye aye, ma’am.” I straightened up and saluted her. If I made a lame joke right now, she might actually go through with her threat. As for why she was so mad, there could be only one reason.

“Care to explain yourself?” she asked. “I’m listening.”

“Explain myself? What do you mean? If you’re referring to the chaos that broke out till morning two nights ago, we were victims of that as well.”

I wasn't lying. Two nights earlier, I'd been with Kugi all night, then had to satisfy the other girls—minus Mei and Konoha—afterward.

"You didn't cause that occurrence…?"

"I'm not a thrill-seeking criminal. Why would I purposely make something like that happen?" I answered with a straight face. *After all, I'm not fibbing…simply masking the truth.*

Colonel Serena stared at me suspiciously, but eventually gave up and sighed. "Good point. I doubt even you would go that far. Sorry; the event rattled my nerves."

"I take it the *Lestarius*…or, well, the entire Pirate-Hunting Unit… wasn't spared."

"It wasn't… Luckily, nothing exceeding the classification of 'accident' occurred. It's certainly fortunate that none of the occurrences rose to the level of 'incident' or 'scandal.' Very much so."

I wasn't sure what determined whether something was an "accident," "incident," or "scandal." Did that depend on an infraction's significance? Whether criminal behavior was involved? Was it simply based on the extent of the infraction? *At any rate, it's good to hear that nothing grave took place.*

No matter what, I couldn't admit that I'd produced the chaos. In the worst-case scenario, I might actually be thrown in jail. After all, what I'd caused was tantamount to a large-scale hypnotic terrorist attack. If it had been confined to our ship, then there wouldn't have been a problem. The event had affected the entire *Dauntless*, however, so simply paying a fine wouldn't cut it. I'd probably face criminal charges.

"Hm? What's the matter, Kugi? You're sweating an awful lot," Dr. Shouko noted.

"N-n-nothing." Kugi *was* sweating bullets, and she was pale in the face.

Kugi? Can you please control yourself a bit? You might give us away. Colonel Serena again glowered at me in suspicion. *No, no, no. We know nothing.*

"Sorry, Kugi. I know I explained that a bit bluntly, but I had to, to clear our names."

“Y-yes, my lord.”

I sent Serena a glance that said, “It’s a delicate topic, so please don’t inquire further.” She didn’t seem happy about that as she glared at me, but however she felt, she had no right to probe further into what our being “victims” meant.

Kugi was the only one with me today. The twins were lazing around, since they were still exhausted from the events of the previous day, while Mimi and Elma didn’t have a reason to come along to the lab to begin with. Mei needed to stay behind to watch the ship. As for Konoha, she had barely left her room since two nights ago; when she did leave, she made sure not to run into me. I’d decided to respect that decision and avoided her too. I understood why she was acting this way.

“Fine, then…” said Serena. “We’ve managed to get things back under control, so we’ll depart in twelve hours. The Screech Owls will accompany us as guides. Be prepared.”

“Understood. We’ll go prep as well, then. Kugi, let’s head back to the ship.”

“Yes, my lord.”

I’d wanted to ask whether the lust wave Kugi and I created had affected the spheres, but I’d missed the opportunity. *Well, since Dr. Shouko and Wells didn’t mention anything, it’s probably safe to assume that nothing happened. I’ll ask them later if I get a chance, though.*

***

“So we’re finally departing?” Elma muttered listlessly. It seemed she had yet to fully recover from yesterday. Her skin glowed, so she was at least in good physical condition.

“Um…why is Kugi curled into a ball over there?” Mimi asked.

“Uh…well, you know that thing two nights ago?”

“The lust wave?”

“Can we stop calling it that? But, well, yeah—that thing. Kugi just learned that it reached much farther than we initially assumed.”

“Oh…”

“You see, what happened would definitely have been embarrassing even in Verthalz—but since people there can protect themselves from such things, it wouldn’t have escalated to the point of criminality.”

“Oh… I see,” Elma said, wincing. She must’ve grasped the implications.

“Here, though, it was basically a terrorist attack,” I continued. “We were thoughtless, and we screwed up, and in a worst-case scenario, that could’ve gotten me thrown in jail. Kugi just learned that today, so she’s a bit down.”

“I see…” Wiska said. “It really *was* basically a terrorist attack.”

Kugi’s ears twitched as she apparently overheard Wiska.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much, Kugi. There’s no evidence, and even if people have suspicions, they’d be impossible to prove. I guess if they tortured us with probes that could look inside our brains, that’d change things, but there’s no way they’d go that far on just suspicions.”

Unless you committed serious crimes, like pirates did, the military wasn’t supposed to look directly inside your mind through a brain hack. That was considered torture. Besides, the *Dauntless* didn’t have psionic equipment, so there shouldn’t be any way for them to determine that Kugi and I had committed this crime—which I wasn’t even sure could be called a crime.

“So ya say, but if episodes like this follow us around, people are gonna notice,” Tina pointed out.

“It won’t happen again. At least, I don’t think it will.”

Since Kugi had…“tuned” me or whatever, I could easily control my psionic powers. There wouldn’t be any more such occurrences unless I caused one deliberately.

“Anyway, it won’t be long before we set out. Take care of any last-minute preparations.”

“Yeah… How are you so energetic?”

“I’m not sure. I feel pretty good right now, though.”

Elma, Mimi, Tina, and Wiska were still exhausted from yesterday’s events, but for some reason, I felt better than ever. *I*

wonder why? Did gaining control over my psionic abilities improve my stamina?

"We don't need to prepare much, since we already resupplied and completed our maintenance checks. If you've got enough energy left, you should spend it consoling Kugi, checking on Konoha, or taking care of Mei. We'll go get ready."

"Okay." *Konoha, eh? I'm still not sure how I should interact with her.*

Konoha was a military officer of the Holy Verthalz Empire, so the lust-wave leakage probably hadn't been a problem for her. Still, for some reason, she was avoiding me. *Don't tell me she took a direct hit from that leakage and ended up in an unspeakable situation?* Maybe I should ask Mei, since she'd likely been monitoring her. Then again, I thought I should at least check on Konoha myself prior to crossing a line and violating her privacy. I decided to console Kugi first, then go check on how Mei was feeling.

***

The Pirate-Hunting Unit moved quickly after departure, thus living up to its name. If it took its sweet time to get moving, pirates would run away long before the fleet arrived, so the unit had taken to heart the importance of brisk and efficient operations.

Mimi and Elma were in the *Black Lotus*'s lounge, chatting idly.

"I always thought that edge worlds were extremely dangerous, but they're really nothing special."

"Well, no. If they were hell zones where pirates and space monsters would attack you relentlessly the second you left the *Dauntless*, not even explorers would dare visit them."

Nearby, I was enjoying a "lap pillow" from Mei. Today was "Mei Appreciation Day," so I was letting her pamper me as much as I could. When operating alongside the Pirate-Hunting Unit, we traveled mostly by autopilot, since we simply had to follow their orders; that meant Mei was free to spend as much time on me as she wished.

The *Krishna* sat in the hangar, and the *Antlion* was docked to the *Black Lotus*, so none of us needed to pilot them. No space pirates were brave enough to attack this fleet; even if space monsters showed up, I probably wouldn't need to do anything, given the fleet's overall strength.

"Is it really all right to just laze around like this…?" Konoha asked with visible contempt.

"It's fine. Running around looking for work won't change anything at this point." I waved off her concerns.

We'd checked our equipment, and everything was in perfect shape. This time, we weren't the main fighting force anyway. Rather, we were here as important psionic-ability advisors and backup that could jump in if needed. Even if something came up, the current plan didn't involve us dirtying our hands, either in space combat or combat on the surface of an unexplored planet. I had no intention of sword-fighting those dangerous metal spiders, and we would only be asked to offer close air support at most from the *Krishna*.

"Our job this time is pretty boring," Tina said.

"There won't be anything for us to do," Wiska added.

"Well, even if we did find something, asking you two to deal with an alien civilization's artifacts would be a bit too much."

Tina and Wiska specialized in ships and technology related to them. If we somehow acquired mysterious alien technology, they wouldn't be able to make heads or tails of it.

"I'm still holdin' out hope that we'll scare up some of that new material those spheres are made of," Tina said. "That stuff's pretty cool."

"Hopefully they find a way to mass produce it…but I think it'll be too expensive to be feasibly use."

"Replacing plating is super expensive," Elma noted.

"Yeah."

Plating was the priciest part of a ship. The lowest quality material was super cheap, but each improvement in quality increased the plating's cost by an order of magnitude. Outfitting even a small ship like the *Krishna* with the highest-grade military plating, rather than standard plating, would increase the

component's cost by two figures. I couldn't even imagine the cost of replacing a ship's plating with whatever was developed from the casing—or carapace—of those spheres.

"Our destination's two star systems away, right?"

"Yes. The Riche System. A star system two hyperlanes from the Kensan System where the *Dauntless* is stationed."

"Is any system information available?"

"I took a look earlier, but there's almost nothing. It's a B-type main-sequence star with four planets. There's an asteroid belt with rocks and chunks of ice in the outer region, and all four planets are rocky."

"There's ice in the asteroid belt? It'll serve as a breeding ground for pirates."

It was possible to extract water from ice, which meant that—so long as they had enough energy—pirates there could remain self-sufficient in terms of food and water. That would make it easier for them to establish a base nearby. *Well, it also makes it easier for the Grakkan Empire to create a colony.*

"The question is whether pirates have already set up there. There haven't been any reports of space monsters in the region yet, so it's definitely possible that they've already created an intermediary base nearby."

"Even if they have, that won't affect us. It'll only become a real problem once the Empire claims this area as its territory and starts colonizing it."

Even if there was a pirate base in the Riche System, it was pretty unlikely that the pirates would try to pull anything against the Pirate-Hunting Unit. In fact, they'd probably be doing their best to hide.

"Aren't we going to go hunt for them?" Wiska asked.

"Depends on Colonel Serena. She might decide not to waste the resources, since our ultimate goal during this expedition is to deal with those spheres. We don't know if the pirates are even there," I answered with a dismissive wave.

The icy asteroid belt made it likelier that pirates had established a base there, but that didn't mean they actually had.

“We will soon enter the last hyperlane before our destination.”

“How long will we be in it?”

“About one and a half hours.”

“We can laze around for another hour, then.”

“Yes.”

Mei stroked my head and stomach as I lay in her lap. Although she was mechanical, she still felt warm and soft to the touch. *What a mystery.* Orient Industries was incredible.

Chapter 7:
Psionic Abilities Unleashed

"MASTER HIRO, COLONEL SERENA just sent a message asking you to come to the *Lestarius*."

"Huh? Why?"

We had arrived in the Riche System and were now set up in the orbit of Riche III, our destination. *Why in the world does she want to see me? What could she possibly need right now?*

"She'd like you to help her adjust to her new power armor. She received the product she ordered, but apparently, she hasn't had a chance to try it out yet."

"I see. Wait... She's planning to go to the surface herself again, isn't she?"

"She *is* an Imperial noble."

"She's the commanding officer of this fleet. When will she get over this bad habit of hers?"

"It's tradition," Elma replied with a shrug.

I understood that it wouldn't matter in space combat, since staying behind other ships wouldn't necessarily save you from taking a hit. However, a leader fighting on the front lines in physical combat was both dangerous and impractical. *But if it's tradition... there's not much I can say about it.*

"Guess I should bring my own power armor, then. Elma, come with me. I doubt anything will happen, but if I do get hurt, I'm counting on you to carry me back."

"Fiiine. The *Antlion* probably won't be called on to provide close air support, so I've got nothing better to do."

The *Antlion*'s main weapon was a high-powered laser-beam emitter, while its secondary weapons were seeker missiles. That meant it wasn't suited to providing close air support on this mission; directed-energy weapons didn't really work against those spheres. The *Krishna*'s flak cannons would probably be more effective. *Actually, the directed-energy weapons that ships use are way stronger than the ones used by infantry and soldiers in power armor, so they*

might actually work… Well, either way, flak cannons will probably work better. Elma and I boarded the *Krishna* and headed toward the *Lestarius*.

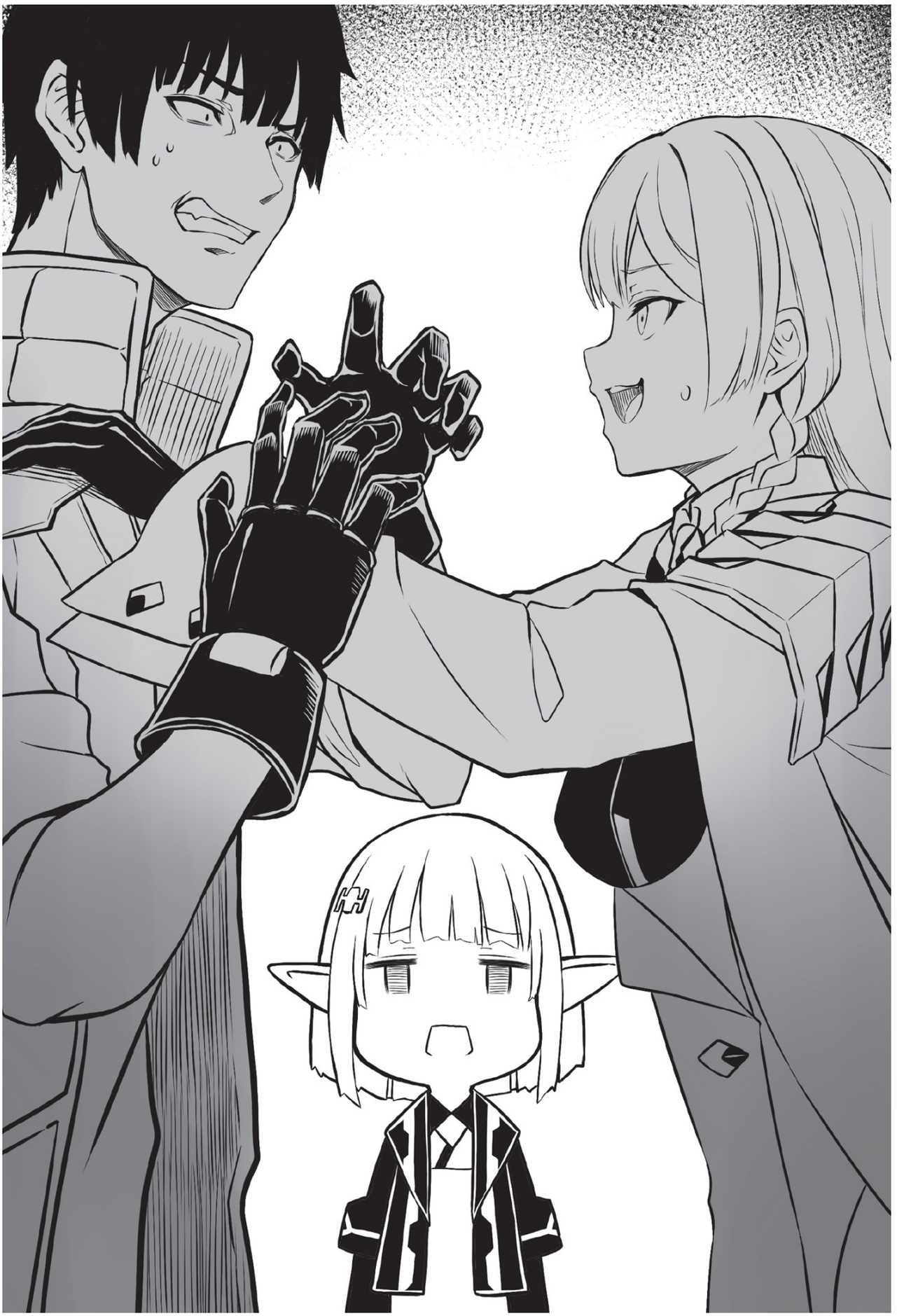
There, Serena requested with a bright smile, “Please come with me for the terrestrial landing.”

With an equally bright smile, I responded, “Sorry. We’re heading out.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Don’t just leave like that!”

Serena latched onto me with all her strength, preventing me from departing. *Damn it! Let go of me! Frigging nobles and their enhanced bodies! Why’re you so strong?!*

“There’s no way I’m going with you! You’ll definitely get into some crazy bang-bang, clash-clash sword fight with those metal spiders or their boss! Last time I went with you to a planet in the middle of terraforming, it was an absolutely miserable experience!”



“It’s *because* that might happen that I need you there! A few soldiers of noble descent will come with us, but you’re the only one I’ve trusted before to watch my back! And we’re the only ones who have prepared custom power armor!”

“Absolutely not! Let! Go! Of! *Me*!” *I planned to just watch the proceedings from a VIP seat in the* Krishna*! What kind of idiot would willingly leap into the jaws of death?!*

“I’ll pay! I’ll pay you! Your mission is to protect the fleet commander, and you’ll receive a bonus upon completion!”

“…How much?”

“Um…about fifty thousand Ener?”

“My life’s not that cheap! Offer at least ten times that, and I’ll think about it!”

“Aren’t you being greedy?! I already hired you at the market rate for a platinum-rank mercenary!”

“Space battles and close air support are part of my contract, but physical combat in power armor with death machines isn’t! Go reread our contract a million times!”

Sighing, Elma interrupted my quarrel with Colonel Serena. “Okay, stop. That’s enough of that. You’re both adults; don’t get riled up squabbling like children.”

“Mgh…”

“Geh…”

It was true that I’d gotten a little heated. *Getting heated was totally normal, though! Who wouldn’t?* Before I could open my mouth to defend myself, Elma stopped me with a raised hand.

“Your concerns are appropriate, Hiro. Putting aside whether you’re good at physical fighting or not, you don’t like combat that puts your body itself at risk. That’s a high-risk task that isn’t part of the contract you signed.”

I crossed my arms and nodded deeply, since Elma had correctly identified why I was upset. *Wearing power armor makes combat much safer than fighting without it, but it’s still no more than flimsy paper compared to the* Krishna*’s cockpit, which is protected by three layers of shields and heavy specialized plating.* The proposed

situation would be extremely dangerous. If I made a single mistake, I might say goodbye to a limb—or my head—for all eternity.

"But, Hiro…if Colonel Serena died because you refused to help her, could you really live with your conscience? Wouldn't you regret it?"

"Hey… That's cheating."

Still, I couldn't refute her point. If I abandoned Serena here, and things went as Elma said, the decision would probably haunt me for the rest of my life. But as long as Elma and Mimi continued to be there for me, I'd be able to move forwa… *Augh! Damn it!*

"Fine, I get it. I lose," I said, sighing as I looked at the ceiling in frustration. *It's no use.* I was no longer capable of abandoning Colonel Serena. I had feared this day would come; that was why I treated her coldly and did my best to distance myself from her. I heaved another heartfelt sigh at how pathetic I was. I just lacked resolve.

"Colonel Serena, you really are crossing the line this time," Elma added sternly. "You take advantage of Hiro far too much. If you use money or his moral code to endanger his life again in the future, *we* won't just sit by idly. You know what I'm getting at, right?"

"Mgh… Yes." Colonel Serena faltered before Elma, who looked more serious than I'd ever seen her.

By "we," she must mean the crew. But it's probably better if I don't think too much about what she's alluding to…for mental health reasons.

"Well, this isn't entirely unexpected. Hiro *is* weak when it comes to pretty women," Elma added, glaring at me.

I had no option but to apologize. "Sorry."

***

So in the end, I found myself in power armor, landing on Riche III alongside Colonel Serena.

How come a mere mercenary like me has to cover the ass of an Imperial Fleet colonel who's also a marquess's daughter? Never mind—I

know the damn reason. I care about Serena. She's beautiful, and to be honest, I kind of like having her around. I think she's pretty intriguing.

I'd never once dreamed that I would one day harbor feelings akin to those of a stereotypical hero pursuing a girl who interested him—especially one so gorgeous. Nor had I imagined that those feelings would lead me to charge into danger by her side.

"Um…I'm sorry," the knight-like white suit of armor standing beside me apologized meekly.

I feel nothing when you apologize to me in that suit. Serena couldn't just remove it now, however. Riche III's environment was extremely inhospitable. Humans couldn't survive it without power armor or some other suit that could withstand the hostile environment.

"I'm not mad," I told her. "I accepted this job, so stop worrying about it. I'm just struggling to come to terms with how big a pushover I am. At any rate, your subordinates are watching us, so you should get a hold of yourself."

"Yes, but…um…I'll make this up to you, so…"

"I told you not to worry about it…although I guess you won't listen either way. Okay, fine. I look forward to however you intend to make this up to me. Go with something special, okay?"

"Of course…" Colonel Serena said, sounding relieved. "Leave it to me." She then turned, facing forward.

Serena and I were inside a makeshift command post created by a material projector. It was about three kilometers from the building where the Screech Owls had found their sphere.

"Okay… Time to find out just how bad our luck is."

"Stop it! Don't jinx us."

"Colonel!" someone said over our comms. "An unidentified object has appeared from inside the ruin-like structure!"

Serena and I hesitated, and our eyes met despite our power armor. The colonel's look obviously said, "See, what did I tell you?"

From within the makeshift-but-shielded command post, she gave an order in a strained voice. "Show me."

If she didn't have power armor on right now, she'd probably be massaging her forehead.

"Yes, ma'am. Sending images."

That voice belonged to the man commanding the forward party, and at the same time as his voice transmitted, images of what he saw projected onto our holo-display. *Good-quality images. They must come from his battle armor's optic sensors.*

"That is indeed an unidentified object," I muttered.

It was difficult to describe. If I had to, I'd have called it a tetrahedron. A towering gray tetrahedron that had some shiny, dark gray limb-like appendage projecting from its underside, which it used for walking. There were features on its surface that looked like eyes, but we couldn't know whether that was their actual function. The entity was more uncanny than intimidating.

"A friend of those spheres…?" Colonel Serena wondered.

"Perhaps a parent or older sibling? In any case, it's definitely higher in the hierarchy," I responded.

She paused. "Try contacting it with that device."

"Understood."

The marines of the Pirate-Hunting Unit prepped the device in question, which was the size of a large bundle, and pointed its parabolic antenna at the tetrahedron. That was the communication device Dr. Shouko, Wells, and the twins had created using the translator-implant database.

Unfortunately, since the spheres had refused to talk with us, we hadn't been able to communicate with them. Still, we'd managed to decipher the mental waves they used to speak to each other, and Konoha and Kugi had confirmed that this device would work.

The device didn't operate via electronic means like other technology. Instead, it was the first communicator in Imperial history based on thought waves. At least, that was how Wells presented it, although I had no way of gauging just how impressive that accomplishment was. Kugi's homeland, Verthalz, likely had much more impressive tools.

"The Screech Owls say this is their first time seeing that thing too."

“Well, it’s not something you’d forget easily once you saw it.”

That meant that our arrival had caused the life-forms here to react differently.

“So either that thing is smart enough to understand and judge this situation, then come up with appropriate responses and choose one…or the boss behind it is.”

“My stomach hurts…” The suit of pure-white knight armor rubbed its abdomen, producing a loud mechanical sound. It looked pretty comedic.

Careful not to scratch up that shiny, polished armor of yours, Colonel.

“Colonel, the object has moved,” Lieutenant Robertson reported.

Looking back at the holo-display that provided the Imperial marine’s point of view, we saw that part of the tetrahedron had split off and was now floating. *Is that miniature tetrahedron a biological offshoot? Well, this isn’t really the time to analyze how it functions ecologically… I should probably be on guard against whatever that action meant, though.* It would be nice if that had been some kind of friendly gesture, but I doubted it.

“Activate shields. Maximum output.”

“Aye aye, ma’am. Activating shields.”

At the same moment the marines activated the portable shield generator, a powerful shock wave struck us. It was accompanied by a thought: *‹Back off.›*

“Gyah!”

“Guh!”

Colonel Serena and the others with us inside the makeshift command post shuddered and cried out in pain. Meanwhile, the picture on the holo-display turned in a strange direction, then stabilized. *The fall-prevention function on that marine’s power armor must’ve activated. It triggers when the user is about to lose consciousness.* The soldiers in the forward party had completely stopped responding. *They must have passed out; the people here, three kilometers away, almost did too. Excluding me, that is.*

“Are you okay?” I asked Serena.

“Why are you totally fine…?”

“I’ve been working out.”

I wasn’t lying. I’d become pretty proficient at managing the psionic powers Kugi and Konoha taught me. That “shock wave” just now had been a powerful thought wave, and I’d completely blocked it using the mental barrier Kugi had taught me. *Even without a mental barrier, I probably could’ve endured it, given how much psionic power I have.*

“What was that?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I don’t think it was a deliberate attack. It was a high-powered thought wave—something like a really loud shout, essentially. A wave that powerful can knock out bystanders without psionic abilities. By the way, it told us to ‘back off.’”

“Back off? How pompous… Wait. You understood that noise?”

“Noise? It sounded like words to—oh, I see.”

I had completely forgotten that, although I didn’t have a translator implant, I was a special case who understood most languages automatically. The normal translator implant apparently wasn’t able to handle that powerful thought wave.

“My translator implant is special,” I said, tapping my ninja armor’s helmet with one finger.

Colonel Serena responded in an exasperated voice. “Your translator implant is special, and you’re a swordsman on par with Imperial nobles—despite lacking physical enhancements. Moreover, you can use psionic abilities, and you’re also an incredible combat pilot. Isn’t that all a little bit much?”

“I mean, it’s not my fault. At any rate, what should we do now? I think the soldiers on the front all blacked out.”

“I’ll wake them up with the medical systems in their suits. Hm…? They aren’t responding.”

The marines’ vital signs were stable, according to their power armor, so they were definitely still alive. But their suits’ built-in medical systems couldn’t revive them. *Maybe because it was suffering mental damage, not physical damage, that knocked them out?*

“Resuscitation via the power-armor medical system has…failed again. Their vital signs are stable, but they’re still unconscious.”

“How troublesome…” said Serena. “I’ve heard that elite soldiers from Verthalz can use their abilities to destroy their enemies’ minds. This effect must be something similar.”

Yeah, users of the second magic—like Kugi—could accomplish something like this easily. Normal people with no defenses don’t have any way to resist their consciousness being torn apart.

“Damn it! I’ll just have to go myself,” Serena declared.

“You can’t.”

A unit’s commander leading the charge might be tradition, but charging at an unbeatable enemy without a plan wasn’t bravery; it was recklessness.

“I’ll go,” I said.

“No. Well… But…”

“I’m the only one who can do this. It doesn’t seem like it wants to fight, and our combat bots are still perfectly fine.”

“That’s true, but… Very well. I’ll accept your kindness.”

“Good. Then see you later, Colonel.”

I saluted, then ran off toward the tetrahedron’s location. If I ran normally in this ninja armor, I could cover three kilometers in under five minutes. *But what if I tried something special?*

***

After making full use of the ninja armor’s power to hit my maximum running speed, I jumped and propelled myself forward with telekinesis. In Riche III’s low-gravity environment, that was enough for me to practically fly.

“Yahoooo!”

Riche III had a thin atmosphere, which meant there was little air resistance. The ninja armor wouldn’t be enough to save me if I crashed into the ground at this velocity, so when I got close to the

ground, I used telekinesis to slow down for a soft landing. *I think I traveled over a kilometer in that single jump.*

"Hup!"

I jumped once more, and small- and medium-sized combat bots carrying marines came into view. *I see… They're using the bots to carry the unconscious marines back. Not a bad plan.*

"How does the front look, Colonel?"

"I suppose you could say we're deadlocked. The subject hasn't made any further movements." She paused. "How are you moving like that? Don't you think you're a little overpowered?"

"I've been working out."

"That's not really a valid explanation…"

Ignoring Serena's complaints, I concentrated on the tetrahedron ahead. *I'm looking at it, but it's also looking at me. I can feel it focusing its attention here. Is that because I'm using psionic abilities?*

"In any event, I have no choice but to try communicating with it."

On my third jump, I reached the forward outpost Serena's subordinates had set up. The dilapidated structure was ahead of me, mostly buried by drifts of sand, with the proud tetrahedron towering before it. *It's really big. About as big as—no, a little bigger than a titan-class combat bot. Those are at least ten meters tall. Well, whatever. I need to check the outpost first.*

"…How reliable." Unsurprisingly, the outpost was all but empty.

The marines stationed there must all have been knocked out by that initial thought wave of "contact," then transported to the rear by the combat bots. The outpost was still manned by titan-class bots and other specialized combat bots that weren't suited to transporting the wounded, but I was the only actual human there. *If things escalate, they can mobilize the combat bots here to help me. And if the battle doesn't seem winnable, I can use them as decoys to escape.*

"I've arrived."

"That was fast. Please make contact with the subject."

"Understood."

I reached toward the psionic transmitter which had been left in the outpost but then thought better of it. It contained spirit silver; if I touched it, it'd probably break. Since I could use telepathy even without the device, I actually didn't need it in the first place.

I shouted from within the outpost at the tetrahedron. "Hey, Mr. Tetrahedron! We're here to talk. Interested in hearing us out?"

In response, a miniature tetrahedron that had separated from the main tetrahedron turned its vertex toward me. For a moment, I thought it was about to attack, but instead it sent a strong thought wave.

‹Affirmative.›

The thought wave was powerful, but not enough to bother me. *Yeah, these thought waves aren't acts of aggression. The soldiers here on the front only passed out because the telepathic output was too strong.*

"Good. You're too loud, though. I can handle it, but the others can't. Reduce the force of your thought wave output."

‹Understood.›

That thought wave was much more manageable than those before. *This tetrahedron's pretty flexible.* "You can understand what I'm saying, right?"

‹Affirmative. I have learned this from those who appear to be your compatriots.›

"Are you saying you extracted the information needed to communicate with us from the Imperial soldiers who passed out here?"

‹Affirmative.›

"I see. I won't criticize you, since that was kind of necessary, but humans prefer to keep the depths of their minds private. That might be hard for you to understand, but I recommend you refrain from similar actions in the future."

‹Will consider.›

Let's see, now... Fortunately for us, this thing seems somewhat cooperative. I get the sense this might be a difficult negotiation, but at

the very least, we've opened communications peacefully. Hopefully further negotiations proceed smoothly.

***

Negotiations—well, communications—did go smoothly. It seemed that he (the tetrahedron) had extracted more from the unconscious soldiers than just the knowledge required to communicate with us. He had a general idea of who we were and why we'd come here.

‹You are interested in the structure of our carapaces. We are prepared to provide the information you desire.›

"That makes things easy. But I'm sure you don't plan to just hand over that information for free, right?"

‹Affirmative. First, we demand the immediate release of our all-purpose work units, which you refer to as "spheres."›

"That sounds reasonable to me. What do you think, Colonel?"

"Demand acknowledged. However, it would be troublesome for us if those spider things started rampaging in transit. I request that you ask them to return to their sphere state until we finish transporting them out."

The tetrahedron couldn't hear Colonel Serena's voice, so I had to act as their translator. It was honestly annoying, but it wasn't as if we had any other options.

‹Understood. We have another demand. Beings of the same species as you—the ones you refer to as "space pirates"—have stolen an important relic from us. We request that you retrieve it.›

This was an unexpected development. We knew that pirates had done some treasure hunting on Riche III, since we'd retrieved several spheres from their base, but I didn't expect them to have stolen a valuable relic from Mr. Tetrahedron.

"We'll do our best to retrieve it. But shouldn't it have been easy for you to drive them off, given how strong you are?"

‹Negative. The space pirates were equipped with primitive weapons that fired metallic objects at high velocity. We lack methods to

protect ourselves against such attacks. In addition, our security unit has become inoperable due to low energy efficiency and long-term deterioration. We therefore lack an effective means of attack. We have another demand.›

"One after the other, eh? What is it?"

‹We wish to be provided with what you refer to as "spirit silver," or other materials with similar properties.›

Oh. Now, that's a tough one. The tetrahedron's first two requests had been simple enough for Colonel Serena to accept. She had planned to release the spheres anyway, if a mutual understanding was achieved; hunting pirates was also her job to begin with. But supplying a large amount of spirit silver or "materials with similar properties"—which meant psionic amplification materials—was a tall order.

"A more detailed negotiation will be required to fulfill your third demand," said Colonel Serena. "We need to know the requested amount, and—if you want us to provide a long-term supply—what you can offer in exchange. But the demand itself shouldn't be too much of a problem under my authority. We can provide you with what we have on hand right now as a deposit."

Ah. She probably plans to hand over the spirit silver stored in the Lestarius*'s research lab. There's a bit more where that came from being kept on the* Black Lotus*. They'll probably ask for that too.*

‹Understood. I assure you in advance that we possess assets valuable enough to warrant your continued expenditure of resources.›

It seemed that Mr. Tetrahedron had a few aces up his sleeve. *If he wants a continuous supply of materials, he'll definitely find a method to achieve that. From what I sense, he's way smarter than I am.*

"This is your translator speaking. I can't do this forever—nor do I want to—so I request that you immediately come up with a way to communicate with each other without my help."

"Very well."

‹Understood.›

Mr. Tetrahedron had seemingly acquired a lot of knowledge from Serena's subordinates, so they could probably figure out a method of communication that didn't depend on thought waves. In

the worst-case scenario, they could just use a specialized tablet terminal to send messages.

***

"I expected things would come to this."

"Stop complaining."

Roughly thirty minutes had passed since I'd been released from my vital role as Mr. Tetrahedron's personal translator. I was now griping in the *Krishna*'s cargo bay. Next to me was Colonel Serena, who still wore her knight-like power armor; an army of power armor-equipped Imperial marines filled the rest of the chamber. It was packed. The train—I mean, spaceship—was at 100 percent capacity. *Is it rush hour right now or something?* In a way, it *was* essentially rush hour.

"It's not like I'm asking you to actively participate in physical combat. Requesting that you give us a lift isn't crossing the line."

"Can I hold you to that? You don't need my help *at all* with combat, right?"

The white knight armor tilted its head slyly. "...It would be really nice of you to help us out a little."

Not cute at all. "So you *are* asking me to participate. Well, fine... but I have a condition."

"I'm listening."

"My condition is that I want to attack the base by myself from a different direction."

This would be a good opportunity to get used to physical combat in my ninja armor. I also wanted to practice the telekinesis I'd learned from Konoha. If things went poorly, and I had to retreat, Colonel Serena could clean up after me. That made this a perfect opportunity to get some training in.

"No way. Although they're only space pirates, that's far too dangerous."

Colonel Serena approached me in her white knight armor, then stared at me point-blank. Our helmets practically touched, like

the heads of lovers, yet I felt nothing. The chest plating on our suits merely clanged loudly when the plates glanced against each other.

“My fighting style makes it impossible to coordinate with your marines,” I insisted. “It’s better for me to act as a distraction by attacking at a separate entrance. You can use that opportunity to launch your assault. That will make things simpler, right?”

“Yes, but…”

“I made this decision on my own, so Elma and the others won’t get on your case about it.”

In the past, Colonel Serena would immediately have agreed without argument, but Elma’s words earlier had been a little too effective; the colonel had seemingly taken them to heart.

“…Very well. Please be careful.”

“Of course.”

I had no intention of dying pathetically. *Heh. This’ll be a piece of cake.*

***

“Enemy ships and turrets eliminated.”

“That was easy. I’m dropping you guys off now.”

We’d been able to destroy the antiair cannons and turrets immediately, as well as the pirate ships that tried to take off from the mysterious structure—well, pirate base—on Riche III’s surface. That was like taking candy from a baby for the Pirate-Hunting Unit’s fighters and the *Krishna*, piloted by Elma. *She really is a skilled fighter pilot.*

Once we’d landed on the surface, I watched Colonel Serena’s power armor-equipped subordinates exit the *Krishna*’s cargo bay. Serena and I were the last ones out.

“Don’t let your guard down, and watch my back, in case I need help.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t go get yourself hurt, okay? Mei’s express delivery should arrive soon.”

“Got it. Oh—that must be it now.”

Looking up at the sky, I saw something engulfed in flames flying in our direction. The flames gradually dispersed as the object continued to fly at an insane speed*. Wait. It’s going to crash right into —!*

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ground shook as the roars of multiple impacts rang out in succession. Having been launched from orbit, transport pods carrying combat bots had come down next to the main-gate entrance of the pirates’ base, crushing everything nearby. *Hang on a sec… Are the combat bots inside the pods okay?!*

“Mei, are the bots all right? Can we even retrieve them?”

“They’re fine. The *Black Lotus* will land and reclaim them later. We launched the bots in surface-attack assault pods—a sample product Eagle Dynamics provided to us.”

Tina butted into the transmission. “They were just sittin’ around, takin’ up space! Glad we got rid of them.”

I see. I did buy the full package, so I guess they must’ve thrown some bonuses in. Not that I knew about those, since I left all that in Tina and Wiska’s hands.

“We haven’t got any more ‘Bikkuri Dokkiri’ mecha like that, do we?”

“We’ve got a bunch, since we bought the full package,” Tina replied.

“Please provide me with a full list of what we bought next time.”

I should’ve paid more attention to what we’d acquired from Eagle Dynamics. *Well, it’s not really a problem; I just don’t like getting surprised like that.*

“This does change our plans a little, but shall we get going?” I asked. “I’ll attack from the back. Sorry, but could you work with our combat bots and take over covering the main entrance?”

“Something like this happens every time we work with you,” Serena complained.

“I really am sorry…” *It wasn’t on purpose. Really.* “Anyway, please take care of the rest.”

“Yes, very wel—”

Before the colonel could finish her sentence, I’d jumped. *Oh, well.* A gigantic telekinesis-boosted leap allowed me to soar right over the pirate base and land on the opposite side. *Was that jump about three hundred meters?*

“What the heck was that leap just now?” Serena asked over her transmitter. “Are you still human?”

“How rude. Yes, I’m a normal human who hasn’t even undergone physical enhancement.”

“You should apologize to actual normal humans. They don’t deserve to be lumped in with you.”

I wanted to protest the colonel’s rude comment but thought better of it. If our positions were reversed, I’d likely say the same things. In addition, it wasn’t my ninja armor that had allowed me to accomplish that leap; I probably could’ve pulled it off even without my equipment. I remembered being creeped out by how Konoha was able to go from motionlessness to covering a great distance in a single jump, but I could now do the same or better.

Of course, that didn’t mean I was stronger than Konoha. In terms of psionic output, I was much more powerful; I had more power than even Kugi. But I only possessed a few psionic abilities, and I didn’t have much experience using them. In short, I wasn’t good at applying my powers. I was now capable of using telekinesis to propel myself, increasing how far and high I could jump, and to cushion my landing when descending from high up. But I couldn’t use it to slice or tear enemies to pieces at will, like Konoha could. Still, my monstrously powerful psionic output in itself did enable certain usages.

“Now then…”

I already heard gunfire in the distance, so it would be best to make as big a commotion as I could. I wanted the pirates to know they were being attacked from two sides; that would serve to divide their forces.

I unsheathed the two blades mounted on the back of my ninja armor. I had already started using them more often than laser guns. *This base must be made from the same high-density metal used to build colonies. No… Since it's on a terrestrial surface, it's likelier to be some stone, rather than metal. Or it might be a form of silicon. In any case, it's some material strong enough to maintain a habitable environment in this planet's thin atmosphere.*

To melt a material like this, extreme heat from something like a plasma grenade was generally more effective than a sword, but my goal today was to understand and practice my abilities.

"Hiyaah!"

I formed an invisible telekinetic fist and slammed it into the structure with all my might. When it made contact, several things occurred at practically the same instant. First, a booming sound erupted from the wall as countless cracks formed when I struck it. The wall had exploded from within. If I had to guess, I'd say that once the cracks in the outer wall reached the other side of the structure, the pressurized air within had gushed out.

Second, the section of wall I'd attacked had flashed for a moment—as if struck by lightning—before it exploded and collapsed. I wasn't sure what caused that, but in any case, that part of the wall had blown up.

Fortunately for me, the giant telekinetic fist I had manifested had served as a shield, protecting me from the shock wave and debris. Unfortunately for the wall, it now looked as though a seeker missile had just blasted it open.

"That's a lot more damage than I expected. I guess it's fine."

We'd planned on destroying this place and killing all the space pirates inside anyway. Colonel Serena had no reason to be upset with a little additional damage.

"That was really loud. Are you okay?"

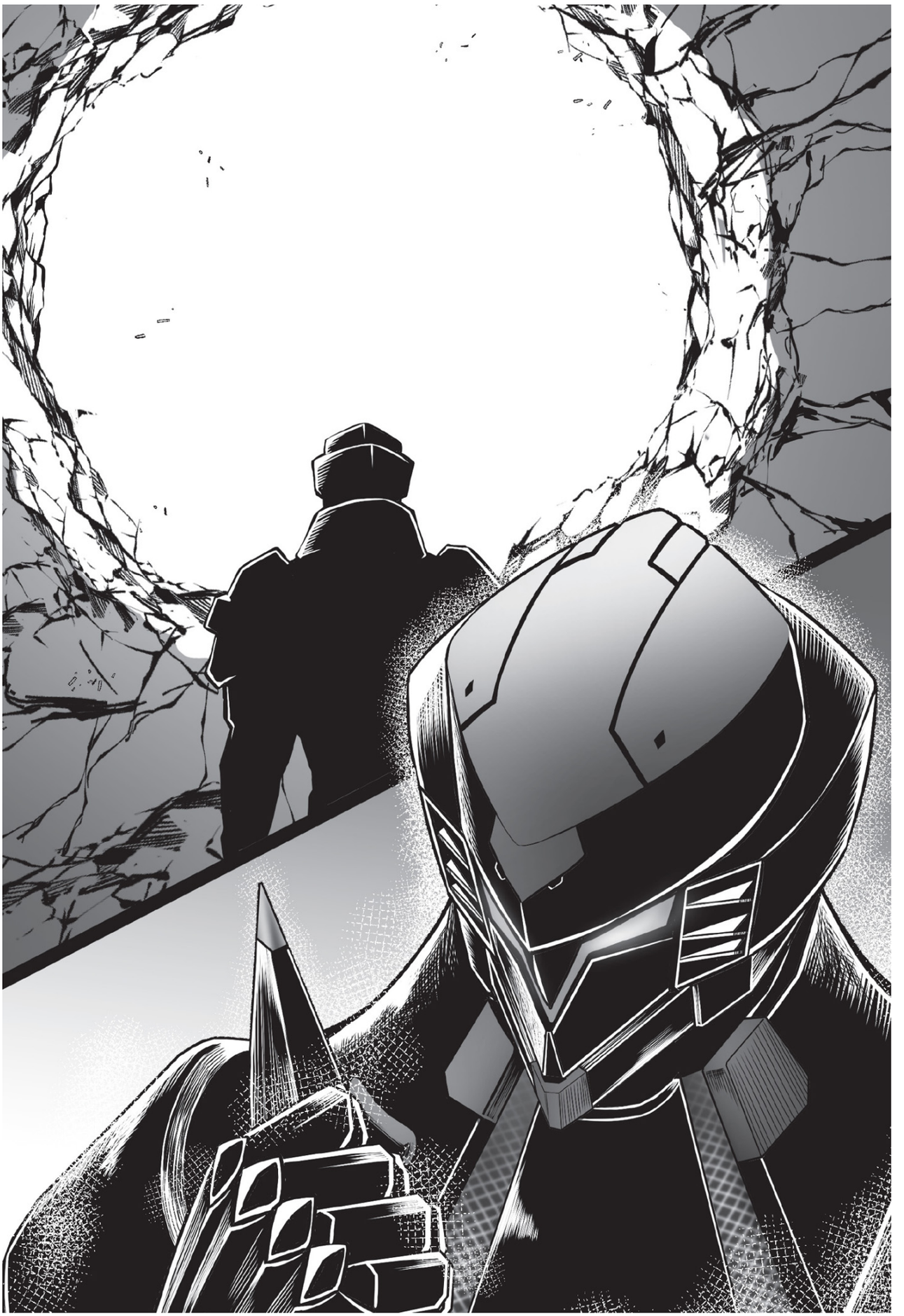
"I'm fine, I'm fine. I just opened a hole in the wall so I could get in."

I stepped inside the structure. Entering enemy territory so casually was usually dangerous, since they could be waiting there to ambush you, but such ambushes no longer worked against me.

Even humans who lacked psionic abilities emitted faint thought waves, allowing me to easily detect how many enemies were nearby.

“Eat this—huh?”

Pirates had poked their heads and upper bodies out from behind cover and around walls, pointing weapons at me, but I immediately snuck behind them. A combination of holding my breath to slow time down and speeding myself up with telekinesis allowed me to pass through their number before they had a chance to raise their weapons, target me, and pull their triggers.



“Mwgh?”

“Guh!”

Of course, I made sure to slash them with my sword as I rushed by, delivering fatal blows. *This combination move is a bit tiring… It’s not very cost-effective, so to speak. It’s also hard to control and takes a lot of focus. As long as they can’t hit me, I have nothing to fear, but there must be a more efficient method.*

As I ran around inside the pirate base, I tried thinking of a more efficient way to utilize my abilities. Meanwhile I sliced, slashed, and diced a good number of pirates.

“No! Damn it! Die!”

“Gah! Blrrgh!”

In the end, the most efficient technique I came up with was the following: I first struck with telekinesis, sending enemies flying into walls or knocking them to the ground. Once they were down, I finished them off with my swords or simply stomped on them with my power armor. I would probably need to come up with a different strategy against enemies wearing heavy power armor, since they’d be harder to knock over, but this should remain effective enough against lightly equipped enemies like pirates.

The pirates must’ve felt very distressed as they were mysteriously bowled over and massacred, but might made right. The strategy’s main drawback was that stomping on pirates felt a little gross. It was best to kill as many with my swords as I could.

Serena got in touch. “Um…I’m receiving reports from subordinates that enemies they’re engaging are sometimes being sent flying before an unknown fighter in power armor shows up and eliminates the foe.”

“What do you mean, ‘an unknown fighter’? You should be able to tell that’s me from my identification signal. I’ll take care of the rest of the pirates; just make sure to retrieve the goods.”

“Hah…”

Why was she sighing? I was just doing my job. I simply didn’t understand her.

Epilogue

"I HAVE A QUESTION."

"What?"

"In the short time since we last met, have you given up your humanity?"

"How rude, Colonel. You're crossing the line with that one."

We were now in the control room of the sea of blood that was the pirates' base. It was true that I might've gotten a little carried away hunting the pirates; I'd killed roughly 70 percent of them on my own before realizing it, which I had to admit was a bit excessive. But suggesting that I was no longer human was going a little too far. *What slander.*

"I mean, how else do you explain this? It hasn't been that long since we sparred with each other."

"My hard work must be bearing fruit by unleashing my latent abilities."

"That's really not a good enough excuse to play this off. I saw an image of the hole you entered the base through. How did you damage that spot so badly? It definitely wasn't the work of a plasma grenade."

"Trade secret."

If I said, "I slammed the wall with telekinesis," I'd absolutely have gotten myself labeled "no longer human." It wasn't like that label would change anything, but part of me stubbornly refused to accept it.

"The combat bots have finished withdrawing, Master."

"Good work. Any damage?"

Mei had been commanding the combat bots from orbit in the *Black Lotus*. She was probably fine, since she'd mostly served as support this time, but I'd decided to check in anyway.

"None. The *Black Lotus* will arrive soon."

"Got it. All right, there's nothing left for me to do here, so I'll head back to my ship."

Serena hesitated. “The innocent young girl in my heart is screaming at me in refusal, but the calm and collected colonel of the Imperial Fleet can’t find a logical reason to stop you. You’re free to go.”

“Wait. Does that mean you’ll hold a personal grudge?! What a pain in the ass!”

It’s that other damn side of you, Colonel. She was actually letting me off easy, though. I wasn’t sure how to react to her being so nice to me, surrounded by this sea of blood flowing from the remains of what were recently living humans. *A sea of blood created by me.*

***

I walked directly back to the *Black Lotus*, which had descended to retrieve the combat bots. The twins awaited me there, and they helped me with the sanitization procedures for the ninja armor. That finished, I was finally able to take a breather.

The moment I sat on the sofa, Tina threw her upper body onto my lap. “Boom!” The three of us had just stepped out of the shower we’d taken together.

“You want some attention? Here you go!”

“Nyooah!”

She twisted around to look up at me, so I cupped both her cheeks in my palms. *“Acchonburike.” Heh heh… What sinfully plump cheeks. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of this.*

Seeing me play with Tina, Wiska walked over and planted her cheek against the back of my palm. “Mnn.”

“Oh, who’s this cute little thing?” *Is she a dog? Who’s a good girl?*

“Mmmyu nyu nyu nyu!”

“Don’t you have to do some combat-bot maintenance?” I asked Tina as I fondled Wiska’s cheeks.

She laid her head on my lap and looked up at me as she answered, “They’re made by the great Eagle Dynamics, so there’s not much we have to do. Since you bought the full package, hon,

maintenance is practically automated—though we do need to conduct final checks once they're done."

"I see. Right. You don't have any more Bikkuri Dokkiri mecha waiting for me, do you? Those assault pods were really a shock."

"Hon, didn't you read the list when we bought all those?"

"I only skimmed through. It seemed fine to me then, so I just went ahead and paid."

And it was too complicated for me to understand, I deadpanned internally. I'd ultimately made the decision based entirely on what I understood of the equipment's specs and versatility. It seemed I'd have to ask the twins to fill me in on the rest later.

"Those things aren't cheap," Wiska told me. "You're surprisingly strict about some things, then surprisingly loose about others."

"He's one of those rich guys who'll spend their entire fortune without realizin' it! People like us have to be *way* stricter 'bout how we spend our money."

"*You* might be," I replied, "but I don't think you can say the same of Wiska. She almost bought some random object from that artifact shop."

"Ugh... Th-that was just a momentary lapse of reason."

As we chatted, my terminal received a message informing me that Elma was returning to the *Black Lotus*. It seemed the previous state of alert had been lifted, since we'd defeated the pirates and achieved peaceful communications with Mr. Tetrahedron.

"Elma says she's en route back here."

"We won't be able to monopolize you for much longer," Wiska said.

"A short-lived reign," Tina added. "Guess we've just gotta enjoy it as much as we can before she's back!"

I patted Tina's head as she rubbed her cheeks against my thighs. *So is Tina a cat? There, there. Theeere, there.*

In the end, the potentially disastrous contact with the unknown here at this edge world had seemingly resolved more peacefully and smoothly than expected. There was no way that

things would suddenly go south and put us in dire straits. *Gah ha ha… I won!*

Afterword

THANK YOU FOR PICKING UP Volume 12 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! We were only able to release a twelfth volume thanks to you, our readers. Thank you so much!

The northern area where I live is still quite cold at this time of the year. How have you all been doing? It's been a wild year for me! Right at the start, I had to get my wisdom teeth out. Then, the moment I recovered, I finally caught that virus that's been going around. Fortunately, I only experienced minor symptoms.

Since the last volume, I've tried out a lot of new games. For example, the console version of a certain famous tabletop RPG, and a game that lets you catch cute monsters and ride them or make them work for you. I also replayed a game that lets you explore the Milky Way while learning alien languages. Its contents had changed a lot, and there were a number of new features that really surprised me.

That's enough about me. I want to touch lightly on this volume's contents. The powerful psionic tanuki girl Konoha, who the previous volume introduced, made another appearance here. Her presence brought about slight changes to the events during their trip, and Hiro's psionic abilities were unleashed to a far greater degree than in the web version of this story. Also, it had been a very long time since we last saw her, but *that* character made a return! What's that you say? The cover spoiled her return? That's true! But Dr. Shouko is back! Do you like older women who look good in glasses? I love them.

Before things get sidetracked in a weird direction, let's move on to the world-building corner! I wanted to introduce portable weapons this time. The standard portable weapons in this story are directed-energy weapons like laser guns and laser rifles. They fire highly focused energy at a single point, vaporizing the target and blowing it up. The resulting wounds resemble primary blast injuries rather than burns. It's like a small bomb detonated at the point of impact. Directed-energy weapons are powerful, destructive, and lethal.

In the story, however, those weapons are popular not because they're destructive and lethal, but because using them in spaceships and colonies is relatively safe. In this story's universe, the destructive properties of directed-energy weapons don't encompass penetrative power. Compared to high-penetration projectile weapons, stray shots from directed-energy weapons are less likely to fatally damage a ship's outer hull. Therefore, portable projectile weapons are very rare in the story's universe at this point in time.

In addition, shields are extremely good at defending against projectile weapons, which is likely a major reason those weapons fell out of use. Shields were initially developed to protect spaceships from debris during FTL travel; that's why, in the story, they can be considered practically impenetrable defenses when used against projectile weapons. Unless you modify a projectile's tip in some way, you won't be able to break through a shield, however many projectiles you riddle it with. Plus, the tips of ammunition for portable projectile weapons are very small, making them pretty expensive to modify. It's much cheaper simply to shoot a shield ten times with a laser gun.

Time for me to take my leave once again.

Thanks to my manager, K; our illustrator, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima; and everyone involved in this book's publication. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this book.

Next stop, Volume 13! Come on out, already!

RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

Footnotes

Chapter 2: The Tanuki Samurai Girl

[1] Food, sleep, and sex.

Chapter 4: Hunting Pirates in the Outermost Region

[2] Japanese term for mouth-beam attacks.



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