I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!

REBORN AS A SPACE MERCENARY

NOVEL 13

WRITTEN BY
Ryuto

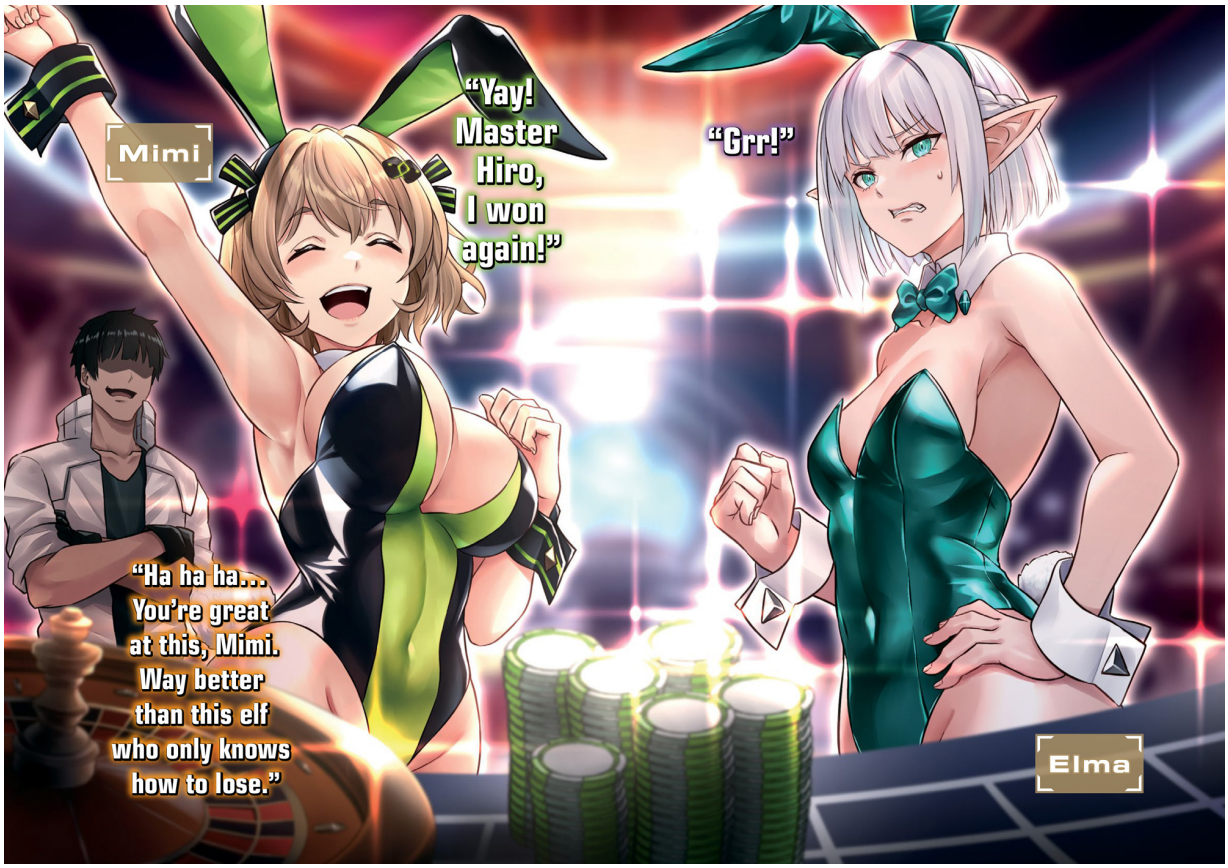
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LOREM IPSUM DOLOR
SIT AMET...
CONSECTETU
ELIT.
SUSPEN
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Shouko
Hiro
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!
A doctor joins the crew.
....


Mimi
"Yay! Master Hiro, I won again!"
"Grr!"
"Ha ha ha… You're great at this, Mimi. Way better than this elf who only knows how to lose."
Elma

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.13
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Prologue

SENSING SOMEONE ENTER THE ROOM roused me to wakefulness. Whoever it was approached me slowly and quietly, which was alarming—but since I didn't detect any malicious intentions, I decided to go back to sleep.

Then the intruder crouched to stare at me.

The weight of the stare was too heavy to bear, so I cracked my eyes open and looked over.

"Oh… Good morning." It was a cute girl with a gentle smile—a cute girl I knew well.

I ran my hand through her slightly wavy light-brown hair and patted her warm, soft cheek. "Good morning, Mimi."

Smiling, Mimi placed her hand atop mine and squeezed. "Morning, Master Hiro."

***

"Oh—morning. You're early today."

Mimi had come to wake me up, so I headed to the cafeteria alongside her. There, I found Elma already eating breakfast. As usual, she was having an artificial steak and a large serving of something that looked like mashed potatoes. Although she was a thin, delicate elf, she always ate a massive breakfast.

"I haven't showered yet," I said. "But I felt hungry, so I decided to eat something first."

"You did show off quite a bit in yesterday's battle," Elma replied with a wry smile.

I "showed off," eh? She's not wrong. I had opened a huge hole in the rear entrance to the space pirates' base, then charged in on my own. Inside, I'd massacred the pirates with my swords. Now that I thought about it, I'd turned their base into a scene of carnage. Not that it bothered me.

"It'll be a bit of a deviation from my usual routine, but first I'll eat, then do some basic exercise, then take a shower," I said.

"I'll accompany you!" Mimi said enthusiastically. Although she still basically looked the same, her previously squishy belly had definitely achieved a perfect, delicate balance between softness and muscle. She was now much healthier than those who lost weight simply by reducing their caloric intake, though personally, I wouldn't have minded if some of that muscle turned back into flab.

"The first order of business is some food," I declared. "Let's get to it."

"Okay! Let's fill up!"

A proper breakfast was vital to efficient work or exercise.

***

After enjoying breakfast with Elma, Mimi and I headed to the training room, only to find the facilities already in use.

"Oh—you two are here," I said. "Morning."

"Ah, mornin', hon. Here to work out with Mimi?"

"Good morning, Hiro. We'll be done soon."

The one who spoke in a Kansai-esque accent was Tina, while the one who spoke in a much more refined manner was Wiska. The pair were both really short, which made them look like children, but both were adults. They were dwarves, and the small frames of members of that race boasted great strength.

At the moment, Tina was doing squats with a barbell. She was holding a load I would have struggled to handle, but she wasn't

even breaking a sweat. Although the pair were small and cute, looking down on them would be unwise. If you upset them, they could use their strength and dangerous engineering tools to do unspeakable things to you.

"Yep," I answered Tina. "Once we're done, we'll shower."

"How 'bout a bath instead?" Tina suggested. "We can all get in together."

"That's a good suggestion," Wiska joined in. "How about it, Hiro?"

"Huh? Hm…what do you think, Mimi?"

"A group bath…? I like the idea!" Mimi was into it.

I doubt we'll just wash during this bath…but I guess that's fine. I was exhausted yesterday, so I got a good night's sleep by myself. I've already eaten breakfast, and after I exercise and bathe with three cute girls, I'm sure my little friend will be raring to go. "Well, if I turned down the invitation, I wouldn't be a man. Let's work up a sweat worthy of bathing."

"Heh heh. You *do* like this sort of thing, don't you, hon?" Chuckling, Tina put down her barbell with a *clang*.

All right… That's that. Tina's up first. I'll make sure to wash her scrupulously from head to toe.

***

"Morning, Mei."

"Good morning, Master."

After enjoying a bath with Mimi, Tina, and Wiska, I visited the *Black Lotus*'s cockpit and exchanged morning greetings with Mei. Hm? What happened to Tina? I'd taken very, very good care of her—I believed she was fully satisfied. Anyway, enough of that for now.

"Has the Imperial Fleet contacted us?" I asked.

"No, Master. They haven't sent any transmissions," Mei replied, shaking her head. A long cable connected to her waist. A Maidroid with long black hair standing in a cockpit lit by the glow of a holo-display made for quite a picturesque scene. It was futuristic, yet fantastical… A scene that didn't seem quite real, despite occurring in real life.

"Chances are they're still busy with the mission. Since they haven't asked us for help, things are probably proceeding smoothly."

We were—or, at least, the *Black Lotus* was—currently in low orbit above the third planet of the Riche System. It would've been easier to maintain our position if we'd relocated to a geostationary orbit, but that would've meant moving tens of thousands of kilometers away. It would also have required us to activate our FTL drives, if only for a moment. Then, if we'd had to return to the planet for some reason, we'd have to figure out how to land, which would've made it difficult to react immediately if the need arose. Landing from low orbit wouldn't be that easy either; still, it was easier than working out an approach from tens of thousands of kilometers away. I'd left Mei in charge of maintaining our altitude.

"Thanks for your help yesterday," I told her. "Controlling all those combat bots probably wasn't easy."

"No, Master, controlling the bots burdened me little. Miss Serena and her marines were in charge of the frontal assault, and our initial attack destroyed the majority of the enemy's threatening defensive systems."

"Ah…you mean our assault pods. Yeah, those things sure packed a punch."

Launched from low orbit, assault pods turned into powerful kinetic energy weapons, destroying the spot where they landed—or rather, their point of impact. To make matters worse for the enemy, a heavily armed combat bot would emerge from each pod as a bonus. I was sure they'd been a very unwelcome surprise from those pirates' point of view.

"Oh, right… I'm changing the topic, but do you know where Kugi and Konoha are? I haven't seen them all morning."

"I believe the two of them have confined themselves to Miss Kugi's room."

"I see. Did they not eat breakfast?"

"No, I do not believe they have eaten. However, their vital signs show no cause for concern."

Huh? Those two usually stick to a healthy daily regimen, so them not coming out for breakfast is definitely suspicious. Is something wrong? "I'll go check on them. Something might've happened."

"Understood. Have a safe trip, Master." Mei saw me off with a courteous bow.

I need to find a way to pay Mei back for everything she does for me. I really do rely on her constantly.

Chapter 1:
The Planet Eater

"IT SEEMS THAT WE caused you worry. My sincerest apologies, my lord," said the girl with shining silver fox ears and three tails. She lowered her head.

"You don't have to apologize…"

I had gone to Kugi's room and been let in immediately. No problems yet. Kugi seemed fine—not as if she was sick or anything. Something was off about her room, though.

"What's going on here?" I asked, tilting my head. Mock tatami mats littered the entrance to the room, some sort of pure-white sheet or mat layered atop them. The sheet was quite large, roughly a meter and a half across. Some kind of complicated symbols were drawn on it in red pigment, and it had what looked like jewels in its four corners. A naked sword had also been placed on top of it. *Is this some sort of ritual?*

"We were attempting long-distance telepathy, but even combining both our magic was insufficient. We're currently testing the various magic tools we have on hand to see whether any can assist us," said a woman with rounded, light-brown animal ears atop her head. The ears twitched when she shrugged.

Her name was Konoha. Like Kugi, she hailed from the Holy Verthalz Empire; she was an official temple guardian. The tanuki samurai girl was the brute-force type, capable of using nothing but her katana to singlehandedly dispatch monsters that an entire platoon of power-armored soldiers would've struggled to deal with. I couldn't help feeling that Konoha—like Kugi, a subservient silver-haired fox miko gal—had too much going on. *Am I the only one who feels that way?*

"I…see," I said dubiously. "Why're you trying long-distance telepathy?"

"I'll explain, my lord," Kugi said. "The artifact you discovered on Riche III—the one you refer to as Mr. Tetrahedron—is likely a shikigami—um, autonomous AI?—an ancient civilization left behind to seal something." As she explained this, her drooping tails and ears perked up.

That's more like it. Back to the normal Kugi. "Continue."

"Well, if that sealed being were released by mistake, I don't think the *Dauntless*'s fighting forces and the Pirate-Hunting Unit Serena leads would be equipped to handle it…"

Kugi phrased that in a roundabout manner, but presumably what she meant was that normal weapons, at least those the Grakkan Empire used, weren't likely to suffice against the potential threat.

"This being you're referring to… Is it really that dangerous?" I asked.

"It may not necessarily be *dangerous*. Considering the type of artifact used to contain it, though… Well, it's not likely to be an aggressive higher-level existence, but it's still probably some form of dangerous space monster," Konoha said with a concerned expression. As a military officer, she likely had solid reasoning to back up her conclusion.

"I can more or less imagine what a space monster would be like," I responded, "but when you talk about an aggressive higher-level existence, what're you referring to? Actually, never mind. I don't think I want to know. In any case, you two were trying to contact Verthalz, anticipating the worst-case scenario, but you lacked sufficient magic even if you combined both your powers. So couldn't you just use my power instead? Wouldn't that work?"

Hearing my suggestion, Kugi and Konoha looked at each other. According to the Holy Verthalz Empire, an overwhelming quantity of psionic energy resided within me. If all they needed was more

psionic energy, then using mine should theoretically resolve the issue.

"If you aided us, Sir Hiro, that would naturally solve the problem… But are you sure about this?" asked Konoha.

I tilted my head in confusion at her question, "I don't really mind. What's the problem?" I didn't see how contacting Verthalz could be problematic for me in any way.

"Well…the Grakkan Empire plans to colonize the Riche System, but by helping us, you'd essentially invite a fleet from our country here. We were concerned that the Grakkan Empire might accuse you of high treason," Kugi explained, her ears drooping.

I see… They're being considerate of my position here. "That's not impossible, but the Grakkan Empire hasn't officially claimed this star system yet. So it would probably be tough for them to convict me on those grounds, even if I did invite Verthalz's fleet here. Besides…"

"Besides…?" Kugi pressed, wearing an uneasy look.

That's a rare expression for her. "If we kept quiet, it's not like they'd have any evidence." As long as the fleet that showed up from Verthalz didn't go around running their mouths about how we'd called them in, anyway. After all, it wasn't as if the Grakkan Empire—or, in this case, Colonel Serena—had any way of knowing whether we conducted long-distance telepathy.

"Thank you for clarifying your position, my lord," Kugi said. "In that case, would you mind sitting in the center of the formation?"

"Okay."

I followed her instructions, sitting in the middle of the mat and crossing my legs. I was curious about why Konoha's katana rested in front of me, but I decided against touching it. I didn't want to repeat what'd happened in the Leafil System when my touch had shattered that spirit-silver hunting knife. While I was lost in thought, Kugi walked behind me and placed her hands on my shoulders, near my

neck. Then she touched my neck, or more precisely, my carotid artery.

"I'm getting a tingly feeling," I said. "This won't hurt, will it?"

"Not to worry, my lord. This won't hurt—at least, it shouldn't."

"Shouldn't…? Well, okay, I guess." *Even if it hurts a little, I'll just endure it,* I thought, calming myself.

Psionic power came from the mind, which meant it should be easier for Kugi to use my power if I kept my mind stable and actively focused on wanting to help her. At some point, I lost sight of Konoha, but after I sought her with my sixth sense, she appeared to be standing behind Kugi.

The jewellike things at the mat's corners began to glow, releasing purple light. I could only see the two gems placed in front of me, but the ones behind me were likely glowing too. Ahead of me, Konoha's katana began to tremble as well. *Is this the start of a horror movie?*

"My lord, are you in any pain or discomfort? Do you feel lethargic?"

"Nope. I'm perfectly fine."

I didn't feel any different. I was a little restless, since Kugi's fingers were touching my neck muscles—if she'd wanted to, she could easily have choked me unconscious. But that was about it.

"In that case…just hold on for a little longer."

Kugi seemed to be struggling, but I remained perfectly fine. The jewels in my peripheral vision began to levitate, rapidly rotating. *How are they doing that? Telekinesis?*

As I indulged in idle thought, the jewels suddenly stopped glowing, and Kugi leaned against me from behind, exhausted. The sound of her panting tickled my ears.

"Are you okay? Did it work?"

"We managed to succeed… Thank you, my lord."

"Good. Feel free to keep leaning on me until you're ready to move again."

Upon receiving permission, Kugi pressed herself firmly against me. *Nice. I can feel her softness pushing directly against my back.* The size of her "frontal armor" was no match for Mimi's, but it was vastly beyond Elma's. On top of that, Kugi's shrine-maiden garments were quite thin. That is to say, I'd found happiness and was very much enjoying myself.

"I'll carry you to the futon," Konoha offered.

"No, no. I'm fine," Kugi said.

Then my happiness left me. *How sad.* Regardless, this wasn't the right time for something like that. I proceeded to check Kugi's condition, since—depending on how seriously exhausted she was—taking her to one of the medical bay pods might be a good idea.

***

As Konoha and I looked after Kugi in her room, my terminal suddenly rang, playing a forceful "ba-dun!" sound.

That ringtone evokes the image of someone getting a Muay Thai kick in the rear…which means it must be her *calling me.* "Hello, how can I help you? I'm a mercenary who can solve your problems for a fee!"

"Sorry to rain on your parade, but I'm not in the mood for jokes at the moment. Emergency." As I'd expected, Colonel Serena was on the line, but her tone of voice was unexpectedly urgent.

"I wasn't exactly joking…but let's put that aside for now. What's going on?" I activated the terminal's holo-display function, switching to a video call. The holo-display projected Colonel Serena's elegant, slightly impatient face. *As beautiful as ever.*

"This is about the artifact *he* asked us to recover from the pirates. It appears that the pirates used some sort of machinery to try to open it and remove whatever is inside."

"Ah…stop. I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear another word."

"Avoiding reality doesn't change it," Serena retorted. "We're doing what we're able to, but we can only contain whatever's inside for a few hours at most before it's released."

"Oh…" *Goddammit. Nothing good ever comes of space pirates.* "I understand what you meant by 'emergency.' Can you give me some concrete details on what exactly is happening? How much time does he say we have?"

"Well, according to him, a space monster he feels we're incapable of handling is going to be released. And we have roughly two to three hours."

By "he," Serena and I were referring to Mr. Tetrahedron, himself an artifact left behind by an ancient intergalactic civilization that had been destroyed. *So he thinks we have three hours tops?*

If I activated the *Black Lotus*'s FTL drive and started zooming away right now, I could easily reach the outer system and escape through hyperdrive. Not that I was going to do that. The contract I'd made with Colonel Serena—with the Imperial Fleet, to be more precise—was still in effect. If I ran away here, I would not only have to pay a breach-of-contract penalty, I'd also ruin my reputation. I might even be charged with desertion under enemy fire for running away in the middle of a military operation.

"Okay. I understand the situation. By the way, Colonel Serena—if you promise to hold it close to the chest, I can share some good news and some bad news. Interested?"

"Again, I'm not in the mood for jokes right now—wait. No. All right, please tell me."

I wasn't one to crack jokes in such serious circumstances either, and Colonel Serena must've realized that, as she responded with the utmost seriousness. I hadn't originally planned to share this with anyone, but I figured it'd be fine to tell her.

"You won't tell anyone?"

"Very well; I won't tell anyone."

"You won't get mad?"

"Fine… If it's good news that might help us through this, I won't get mad."

All right; she'd agreed. I'd intended to keep this secret, since there was no way that anyone would know so long as I didn't tell them. If we had less than three hours before that "dangerous space monster" Kugi mentioned was released, however, that changed things.

"I'm not only acquainted with forces capable of dealing with that space monster, but those forces are also rushing here right now," I revealed.

"I find that hard to believe, but if you're telling the truth, that is indeed good news. So what's the bad news?"

"Those forces belong to another empire. They're a fleet from a different galactic empire, not the Grakkan Empire. Specifically, the fleet is from the Holy Verthalz Empire."

"Huh?"

It'd been a long time since I'd heard Serena respond with an intimidating "Huh?"

"What?!" she continued. "You—! Idi—!"

"Um… 'What were you thinking? You know why we're here in this star system, don't you? Moron! You're an idiot, aren't you?!' Are you trying to say something like that?" I asked.

"You understood all that?!" Serena demanded. "No—more to the point, why?! The Holy Verthalz Empire?! *Why?!*"

"Uh, well… Verthalz has developed technologies capable of predicting the future, like prophecy and fortune-telling. They must have sensed the potential danger here and decided to send their fleet. Not that I know for sure." I'd decided to hide the fact that I

helped Kugi summon the fleet through long-distance telepathy, instead making up a convenient reason why they might have been coming. *I shouldn't tell such brazen lies, huh? But white lies are acceptable sometimes, right?*

"I…see? No—that makes no sense. Even if it were true, how would you know they're coming?!"

"They sent me a telepathic message along the lines of 'We're on our way to your location right now.'"



"You expect me to believe that?!" Colonel Serena retorted, her elegant face contorting on the holo-display.

Yeah… She can't exactly blindly believe me and start giving her fleet commands on the basis of such a flimsy story. "Our crew includes a telepathy specialist, and I've also awoken comic book-esque superpowers. I'm telling the truth. Anyway, Temple Guard Officer Konoha of the Holy Verthalz Empire, how long until the fleet arrives?"

"Unless things changed in the time I've been gone," Konoha answered, "they should be here within an hour and a half to two hours, so long as the immediate-response fleet hasn't already embarked in response to a separate matter. If the fleet *is* currently preoccupied, then under normal circumstances, they should be able to assemble and deploy a second emergency-response fleet within three hours."

"You heard her."

"Did I? And how exactly is their fleet supposed to get here so quickly? The Holy Verthalz Empire is ridiculously far from the Riche System. Even if they travel by gateway, there's no way they'll make it here in time."

"Konoha, you're the expert. How will they get here in time?"

"No comment." Konoha looked away. That was apparently a military secret.

"You heard her. It seems she's not allowed to tell us."

"Figures," Colonel Serena said in resignation, eyes half closed. Evidently that explanation didn't really satisfy her.

"I've heard rumors that Verthalz has proprietary fleet technology—psionic technology, that is—allowing them to 'warp,'" I said. "And I think they probably have a method to greatly increase such a warp's range—something like a catapult that grants output a significant temporary boost. Or maybe they've got something similar to a gateway that uses psionic technology."

"Warping… I *have* heard such rumors." Colonel Serena placed her shapely hand to her chin, sinking into thought.

Warping—traveling via space warp—was a different method of FTL interstellar travel, as opposed to the commonly used hyperdrive method. But, though that definition might have made it sound like an alternative way to travel through space, warping wasn't exactly commonplace. In fact, Verthalz's fleet was likely the only one equipped to travel in such a way. At least, I wasn't aware of any other fleet that could.

Still, space warping was simple to explain. Rather than traveling by hyperlane, you instead warped to your intended destination. It was essentially a form of teleportation. It might've sounded similar to using a gateway, but gateways functioned differently. That method of travel that made use of wormholes to connect two points in space, so it would be more accurate to refer to gateways as *wormhole* technology than *warp* technology.

"Assuming that's true," said Colonel Serena, "what's our play here…? No matter what, we won't be able to retreat in time, so it's best to prepare for battle. Be ready."

"Aye-aye, ma'am."

According to Mr. Tetrahedron, the combined forces of Colonel Serena's Pirate-Hunting Unit and we mercenaries wouldn't likely be a match for the space monster. Still, Serena's mission was to secure the Riche System and Mr. Tetrahedron, who had information about a new resource material. That meant that she couldn't just run away with her tail between her legs. And since I was contracted to the Pirate-Hunting Unit—or more specifically, the Imperial Fleet—I wasn't allowed to flee either.

In the worst-case scenario, I'll have no choice but to run away… Let's just pray it doesn't come to that. I'm counting on you, immediate-response fleet or whatever of the Holy Verthalz Empire.

***

Around an hour and a half later, we entered level-two battle stations in Riche III's geostationary orbit. "Level-two battle stations" referred to a state of alert in which we had to be ready to enter combat with any enemies that suddenly appeared. It wasn't just us in the *Krishna* entering that state. The *Antlion,* piloted by Elma, and the *Black Lotus,* commanded by Mei, were also at level-two battle stations. Konoha, Tina, and Wiska were on standby in the *Black Lotus*, while Kugi and Mimi were with me aboard the *Krishna*. The *Black Lotus* would be stationed at the rear of the grouped vessels, alongside the Pirate-Hunting Unit's capital ships, which was a relatively safe position. That placement was appropriate, given the importance of safeguarding Konoha, who was here as an advisor from Verthalz.

As a side note, according to the Grakkan Empire's Imperial Fleet, level-two battle stations essentially implied "be prepared to enter level-one battle stations at any time," with "level-one battle stations" being actual combat. It entailed readiness to engage with enemies at any moment even if enemies hadn't yet been detected.

"So will that immediate-response fleet make it in time?" Elma asked through her comms.

"Who knows? Even using my powers, we can't communicate with them in real time. I might possess sufficient psionic reserves to handle that kind of task, but my energy is being channeled into Kugi. She's the one actually using it, and her body can't handle the strain of doing that constantly."

"That is indeed a failing on my part," Kugi said. "I'm truly sorry."

"It's not really your fault. If I don't control my psionic energy properly, I can emit enough of it to blow away several planets, right? It's incredible that you're able to receive and control that much energy even for a moment."

This was probably similar to taking a battleship's most powerful generator and jury-rigging it to fit a small vessel's thrusters. If things

went awry, it was entirely possible that Kugi might explode under the pressure.

"Looking at it that way, it's a miracle that Kugi's still okay and didn't overload on your energy," Elma remarked, grimacing.

She must've reached the same conclusions I had. Kugi *had* collapsed for a short while after receiving my energy before, although she seemed fine now.

"Master Hiro, what do you think Colonel Serena's plans are for this battle?" Mimi asked.

"Well, let's see… Asking someone with a normal brain, like me, to keep up with and predict plans created by Colonel Serena's physically enhanced brain is a tall order… But at the moment, she's probably enduring stress-related stomach pain, feeling torn between adhering to her mission and adjusting based on the information provided to her. Mr. Tetrahedron told her that she probably won't win with her current fighting power, but given her mission, she can't just accept that info and flee without even trying to fight. She probably plans to give the fight a shot, collect as much data as possible, and hopefully retreat with minimal casualties."

Hopefully that dangerous space monster that Mr. Tetrahedron had sealed was one that would allow for escape.

"Are we sticking with Colonel Serena to the bitter end?" Elma asked me.

"If the battle seems to be going poorly, the *Black Lotus* and *Antlion* should retreat first. *Krishna* will serve as a vanguard and buy time. Sorry, Mimi and Kugi."

"That does seem to be the best plan… Make sure you escape and come after us, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

If we really had no chance, there was nothing I could do. But, if it was avoidable, I didn't want to abandon Colonel Serena. At any rate, if worst came to worst, it would be best to start by having the

Black Lotus and *Antlion* flee, since they were slower. Meanwhile, I'd hang in there for as long as I could. Given how fast the *Krishna* was, I should still be able to get away just fine.

Although it made me a failure as a mercenary and a captain, I wasn't the kind of person who would feel no qualms about running away immediately, abandoning Colonel Serena. *Well, whatever. I do what I want. I feel bad for worrying Elma, though.*

"If you die," Elma said, "then the *Antlion*, *Black Lotus*, and Mei will belong to me."

"Fine by me. You hear that, Mei?"

"…If those are your wishes, Master, then I will comply."

In the event that such a thing happened, my crew would probably end up selling the *Black Lotus* and operating the *Antlion* as a team of four: Elma, Mei, Tina, and Wiska. *What about Dr. Shouko? Without the* Black Lotus*, they couldn't provide the type of research facilities she'd want, so she probably wouldn't join them as the ship's doctor.*

"Talking about stuff like that makes it sound like we're cursing hon," Tina objected. "We should talk about what we wanna do after we beat that space monster!"

"Discussing what we want to do after this battle would be a death flag, Sis…"

"Oh, right. I didn't say nothing!" Tina laughed.

Tina can brighten the atmosphere with a joke even at a time like this… I really can't match her. "It's been almost two hours."

I switched the *Krishna*'s main screen to a wide-view map and confirmed the current fleet's positions. Colonel Serena's *Lestarius* and the other capital ships were in place, but ships the size of destroyers and smaller were still moving to their spots, most likely because it'd taken them longer to recall all the soldiers who'd deployed to the surface. The mercenaries were all in position

already, since the mercenaries aside from me had been tasked with patrolling nearby space.

Mercenary ships tended to be either small-or medium-sized vessels to begin with. According to the military's labels, they'd be classified as fighters, frigates, or corvettes—all extremely small ships. In fleet battles in which battleships and cruisers comprised the main fighting forces, small ships were only useful for close-range brawling. The difference in range and firepower between them and larger craft was simply too great. Of course, gunboats pretending to be motherships—like the *Black Lotus*—were a different story.

"It wouldn't be strange for either of the parties we're waiting for to show up right around now…"

That said, the *Krishna*'s sensors hadn't yet detected anything. I checked the *Antlion* and *Black Lotus*'s sensors too; they hadn't picked up anything strange either.

"Nothing ye—wait. What the…?"

Suddenly, an oppressive force assaulted me, which plunged me into confusion. The sensors had yet to detect anything, but I was definitely experiencing very real physical pressure. Kugi must've felt it too; her usually elegant face scrunched up in a wince as she struggled against it. On the other hand, Mimi seemed completely unaffected. She even had the luxury of worrying as we behaved strangely.

"What happened?" she asked.

It seemed that the pressure had only affected those with psionic powers. *Did Elma experience the same pressure in the* Antlion*?* "We started getting a weird sensation that probably has something to do with psionic power," I explained. "Kugi, is that a sign that Verthalz's fleet is about to arrive?"

"No… It's something different."

"That space monster must've caused it, then. All hands on deck… Level-one combat stations. Mei, send Colonel Serena a

warning.” Konoha might already have warned her, but if I sent a message cautioning the colonel too, that should increase the warning’s credibility.

“Yes, Master. I sent her a warning.”

“It’s coming, my lord,” said Kugi.

“Yeah.”

The moment I responded, that sense of oppression suddenly exploded.

***

“It’s freaking huge,” I remarked half unconsciously as the space monster came into view.

It resembled a gigantic jellyfish. A gigantic jellyfish that glowed like a star in the sky. It had appeared right next to Riche III and was absolutely gigantic—so gigantic that the word “gigantic” felt presumptuously inadequate in its gigantic presence.

“Did the sensors’ automatic scaling stop working?”

“Uh…the creature’s bell alone seems to measure at least a hundred and fifty kilometers…”

“The *Lestarius* looks tiny in comparison… How the heck are we supposed to deal with that thing? Will lasers even work on it? Are we going to fight it?”

If you include its extended tentacles, it’s roughly five hundred kilometers long, I thought, frowning. The *Krishna* was a mere ant before it; even the much larger *Lestarius* was comparatively puny. *I’ve never seen a space monster that big before. Not even playing* Stella Online*.*

“Mimi, start analyzing,” I directed. “Kugi, prepare—crap! It’s coming! Dodge it!”

Sensing the monster’s hostility—or, well, its desire to eat us—I immediately directed the *Krishna* to execute evasive maneuvers. In

the next second, the astral jellyfish fired countless light orbs at us. It was a scene right out of a bullet-hell game.

The light orbs, as that term suggested, traveled at light speed; they were much slower than laser cannons. Several ships failed to dodge the orbs in time, however, perhaps stunned by the astral jellyfish's appearance.

"Those went straight through our shields?!" someone cried. "Shields aren't effective against the unidentified enemy's attacks!"

"One of the mercenary ships it struck just exploded! Ship down!"

"Damage control, stat! This is mercenary vessel *Stiletto*! We suffered severe damage from that bastard jellyfish's attack!"

It was utter pandemonium. Shields apparently wouldn't ward off that thing's attacks; depending on where its projectiles struck, it could take down mercenary ships with a single hit. *Do those light orbs work like plasma accelerators?* Plasma accelerators fired high-energy plasma projectiles enclosed within a barrier, but although they were powerful weapons, they weren't overpowered enough to penetrate a ship's shields from a long distance. Those light orbs might be similar, but they were far more dangerous.

"Front vessels, prioritize evading those orbs as you retreat to the capital ships' position! Capital ships, maintain your distance from the alien lifeform and commence firing!"

We then received intel from the *Lestarius* on the expected range of the astral jellyfish's attacks. Its previous wave of attacks had only reached those ships deployed in front—namely destroyers and smaller craft. *If we outrange it, we might be able to deal with it by shooting and retreating*.

Keeping an eye on the astral jellyfish, I began to retreat toward the capital ships' location. As I did so, those capital ships—led by the *Lestarius*—fired their long-distance, high-powered, large-caliber laser cannons at the astral jellyfish.

"Landed a hit…! But it doesn't seem to have done any damage!"

"Keep shooting! Fire reactive warhead missiles too!"

The capital ships proceeded to launch anti-ship missiles outfitted with reactive warheads. In typical fleet engagements, battleships like the *Lestarius* didn't need long-range missiles. Such battles were typically fought from a distance using large-caliber laser cannons; the other party's anti-missile lasers would simply have shot down slower weapons like missiles. Thus, capital ships mostly just used whatever missiles they carried to finish off enemy ships or strongholds no longer capable of intercepting them.

But anti-ship missiles with reactive warheads carried much more destructive force than high-caliber lasers, and since our enemy this time was a gigantic astral jellyfish, there was no need to worry about it somehow evading the missiles. Even if it managed to intercept some of them, most would still land. At least, that was probably Colonel Serena's rationale.

"The reactive warhead missiles exploded before making contact with the alien lifeform!" one ship reported.

"Laser cannons don't seem to have an effect!" another added.

Unfortunately, things weren't working out according to the colonel's expectations. The astral jellyfish didn't seem to care at all about the lasers striking it, and the anti-ship missiles—though not intercepted—somehow exploded before even reaching their target. Perhaps the astral jellyfish radiated heat capable of melting and burning to a crisp anything that approached it, the way a star would.

"Mei, did the EML work?"

"No, Master. Extreme heat turned the projectile into plasma before it reached the enemy."

"Not even *that* worked? This'll be tough."

Among projectile weapons, EMLs were the fastest, and they had the most penetrative power and force. If even EMLs didn't do

the trick, that pretty much ruled out *any* projectile weapon working effectively. But laser weapons seemed not to work either, and missiles detonated before reaching the enemy. At this point, we'd need to try a disruptor weapon that bypassed shields and plating, or some charged-particle cannon—AKA a "beam weapon." Unfortunately for us, neither the *Krishna* nor anyone else in the fleet had anything like that; the Grakkan Empire had yet to adopt such weapons officially.

That meant that we had no effective way to fight this astral jellyfish.

"If only the Grakkan Empire had developed and adopted gravity cannons, we might've taken it down easily!" I complained.

"What's the point of wishing for things we don't have?" Elma responded. "Ah!"

The astral jellyfish had just launched another wave of countless light orbs, once more leading to pandemonium on the communications channel. Elma had seemingly survived, though.

Hm? Wondering about us in the *Krishna*? I kept our bow trained on the astral jellyfish and dodged while retreating backward. There was no way I'd ever get hit by such an indiscriminate attack.

The capital ships under Colonel Serena's command likewise continued to retreat while zealously firing their high-caliber lasers at the astral jellyfish. Still, there weren't any signs of those lasers doing anything. They were definitely hitting their target, though; they weren't passing through the jellyfish's body, nor were any shields blocking them.

"Looks like we're out of options. We should retreat—hm?"

For a moment, I experienced a pressure similar to what I'd felt when the astral jellyfish appeared. Then, on the astral jellyfish's other side, there was a bluish-purple explosion. It dissipated in a literal flash, and unfamiliar ships appeared in its place.

"That's them, right, Kugi?"

"Yes. There's no mistaking them. Those are my homeland's combat ships," Kugi confirmed, magnifying the images the *Krishna*'s optical sensors picked up.

There were fewer vessels than I'd expected; they totaled only eighteen. Still, they were all larger than the *Lestarius*. The Verthalz ships were reminiscent of sailing vessels, their graceful, aerodynamic white hulls adorned with golden ornaments. Three sets of gigantic pink wings of light, their purpose unclear, extended out behind each vessel.

"Quite a flashy design, though I'm not sure what those ornaments are for," I commented. "I guess they have something to do with the fact that these are psionic ships?"

The ornaments seemed pointless from an outsider's perspective, but I speculated that they served some psionic purpose. After all, psionic powers were basically magic.

"This is the Holy Verthalz Empire's immediate-response fleet," came a new voice. "We hold no hostile intention toward the Grakkan Empire's fleet. We will handle the Planet Eater. Please retreat."

"This is Colonel Serena of the Imperial Fleet's Pirate-Hunting Unit. We can't just tuck our tail between our legs and run away against a space monster. We'll at least distract the creature for you."

"…Understood. We will prioritize your wishes and inform you as needed of our attacks' expected area of effect. Whatever you do, please avoid becoming collateral damage. All ships, suppress the target with Soul Crush."

"Roger," other voices said in unison.

Following the orders of the man who was likely their commander, Verthalz's fleet moved into position. The *Krishna*'s optical sensors picked up something resembling a crest of light emerging at the bow of each warship.

"What the hell are those movements?" I asked. "Creepy."

"You're not really one to talk," Elma quipped in return.

That was uncalled for, Elma. My maneuvers are nowhere near as weird as what they just did. The Verthalz ships had moved into formation, but rather than *flying* into position, they'd *slid* in, coming to a halt immediately without ever facing in a different direction. These ships were larger than the *Lestarius*, yet they slid around without even firing their thrusters. *Freaky*. *My movements with the* Krishna *are nowhere near that unsettling. How can they even change location without using their thrusters? Do those six conspicuous wings allow for some kind of movement?*

"'Planet Eater' and 'Soul Crush,' eh? Those are some impressive names."

"Do you think that monster really eats planets, as the name suggests?" Mimi asked.

"Who knows. Given how the thing can vaporize an EML projectile before it lands, and how it can just completely ignore laser strikes…it might really be capable of melting and absorbing whole planets."

As Mimi and I discussed the astral jellyfish—which I'll now call the "Planet Eater"—the crests Verthalz's immediate-response fleet had deployed began to glow dazzlingly.

"Oh—it seems they're about to attack…Master Hiro?"

"That's bad news."

I wasn't sure how to explain why that was; still, I'd broken out in goosebumps. This attack *was* bad news. It wouldn't be the type you could block with shields. That jarring light didn't simply kill; it destroyed the source of life itself. As its name suggested, this was likely a weapon that really did crush souls.

"Kugi, is every ship in Verthalz equipped with a weapon like that?"

"I am not very familiar with military matters in my country…but I would imagine so, yes. I've heard that my homeland's ships are

armed with magic-based weapons. The Soul Crush weapon they are currently deploying derives from the second magic."

"The second magic can create terrible weapons like that?"

At that point, the crests deployed in front of Verthalz's ships fired white lasers that pierced the Planet Eater.

‹Greeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!›

The Planet Eater let out an earsplitting scream as it writhed and trembled. Sound didn't normally travel through space, so the shriek was seemingly some form of telepathy.

Mimi looked over at me; we were both grimacing. "I feel like I just heard something screech."

"You didn't hear it clearly? I *definitely* just heard that thing scream in pain. So did you, right, Kugi?"

Kugi nodded, wincing in discomfort. Her ears were drooping; that scream must've sounded quite loud to her.

After eating the barrage of Soul Crushes, the Planet Eater appeared to writhe in agony. It must've realized that Verthalz's fleet had attacked it, because it responded by shooting countless light orbs in their direction. That volley of light orbs was significantly denser than the one it had fired at us earlier; it must just have been testing the waters when it attacked us.

"Oh man, that's way too many. There's no way—wait, what? They're getting hit…right? So how come it looks like the orbs are just going through them?"

An overwhelming swarm of light orbs had assaulted the Holy Empire's fleet, but the vicious barrage simply passed right through as if the fleet weren't there. The ships hadn't blocked the orbs with shields, nor evaded them, yet those light orbs that clearly landed direct hits simply passed through.

"I don't get it… Are they using dimension shift or something?"

"Demenshun shift?"

"It's a defensive maneuver that involves temporarily taking refuge in a misaligned dimensional space to avoid an attack… Are those Verthalz ships we see even real, or just phantoms? I guess that wouldn't make sense either."

It was possible that the ships we saw were simply illusions created in an alternate location, with the fleet's actual location hidden from our eyes. Either way, some sort of abnormal technique had to be at work.

‹Gweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!›

Once the onslaught of light orbs ended, the immediate-response fleet launched another Soul Crush barrage, further damaging the Planet Eater. Considering how energetically it could still scream after being subjected to that terrifying attack multiple times, the Planet Eater was impressively sturdy.

"I doubt Soul Crush is the only weapon those ships are equipped with…" I commented.

"Yes, my lord, I believe you are correct. My understanding is that these types of expeditionary forces are responsible for repelling invasive space monsters and dimensional monsters. Some such monsters invade in swarms, so these ships must have weapons capable of dealing with whole groups as well."

"You mean they have a separate weapon designed to deal with multiple enemies at the same time?" Mimi asked.

"There are only eighteen of those ships, and they don't get advance warning about what kind of situations they'll find themselves in. It makes sense that they've prepped weapons to handle multiple enemies too," I told her.

Watching the intense but one-sided battle between the Holy Empire's fleet and the Planet Eater, I pondered what that weapon might be. I honestly had no clue. The fleet had no way of knowing what kind of enemies they'd encounter. Maybe they had some weapon that could destroy everything within a specific area of space, or maybe they'd just use a wide-range telekinetic attack.

Wait a second… Won't them showing off like this freak out the Grakkan Empire? Or, rather than "showing off," is this just a fraction of Verthalz's true power? Either way, they're not people I'd want to mess with.

"Looks like it's over."

In the end, I wasn't sure how many times the immediate-response fleet fired. After eating quite a number of Soul Crushes, however, the Planet Eater finally shuddered one last time, then dissolved into the void of space and vanished. The high-energy sensor signal representing the Planet Eater disappeared as if it'd never existed; it simply vanished. The thing was likely dead.

"I expected a huge explosion or something when it died," Mimi said.

"Quite an anti-climactic ending," I agreed.

I really hadn't been able to do anything this time; I hadn't fired my laser cannons even once. The enemy had been far too powerful. It was a foe that the entire Pirate-Hunting Unit combined couldn't have hoped to defeat in a direct confrontation, so I supposed that was to be expected.

"All that's left is some boring post-battle cleanup," I said. "I'll leave that to Colonel Serena. Actually, no… That's a bad idea."

Kugi, Konoha, and I had been responsible for summoning the Holy Empire's fleet. I didn't have the right to butt too much into discussions between the fleets from the Grakkan Empire and Verthalz, but I should at least act as a mediator.

"Let's head back to the *Black Lotus* for now and regroup with Konoha. I'll get in touch with Colonel Serena while you and Konoha contact the Verthalz fleet."

"Yes, my lord."

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"How did things end up like this?" I muttered as I looked around at the people gathered in the cafeteria linked to the ship's lounge. On the right side, wearing white-accented military uniforms, were Colonel Serena and other members of the Grakkan Imperial Fleet. On the left, wearing what looked like Japanese-style body armor and traditional Japanese military attire, were the Holy Verthalz Empire's soldiers. I saw black wings sprouting from someone's back; others had animal ears and tails. The *Black Lotus* had been chosen as a provisional conference hall for the two countries.

"Your ship is the closest thing we have to a neutral location, Sir Hiro," said a man with black wings growing from his back. He was serving as Verthalz's chief representative. Karasu—that was the name he'd used to introduce himself—looked over at me with a shady smile.

"You're an honorary viscount of the Grakkan Empire," Colonel Serena added, "but also a platinum ranker from a neutral public organization, the mercenary guild. Furthermore, you're traveling with Kugi, a shrine maiden of the Holy Verthalz Empire. This arrangement makes it less likely that things will go badly, compared to us boarding one of the Holy Empire's ships or them coming aboard one of ours. So just resign yourself already."

"Got it…" I responded. "Well, I'll do what I can to serve our guests."

That said, it wasn't as if they were here to have a meal. All I had to do was provide some bottles of water and prepare some tea.

"How about we begin, then?" suggested Karasu. "I don't believe we have anything particularly complicated to discuss today. Wouldn't you agree?"

"That's true," Colonel Serena replied. Karasu's shady smile was a far cry from her sour expression.

In brief, Karasu said the previous battle had unfolded in an unclaimed system, one that no galactic empire had even declared an intention to claim. While investigating the system, the Grakkan

Empire had encountered a space monster, and the Holy Verthalz Empire had happened to pass by during the battle. They'd decided to help, as that was their national policy and the right thing to do. Both parties' efforts resulted in the successful suppression of the dangerous space monster. Since neither party had expected to gain anything from cooperating during the battle, neither side owed the other a debt.

Colonel Serena sent a look tinged with suspicion at the shady Karasu.

She wasn't the only one; her subordinates were clearly also suspicious of his intentions. That was to be expected. This was the perfect opportunity for Verthalz to strongarm the Grakkan Empire into their debt, but the Holy Empire's stance was essentially, "That's unnecessary. And we don't care about exploits in combat, or about this system's ownership rights either. Do whatever you want." That simply didn't make sense, so it was natural to suspect Verthalz of plotting something.

In any event, it wasn't my problem. After all, I had no right to speak up here. *How long will this unproductive meeting take? Can it end already?*

"It seems our explanation was insufficient," said Karasu. "It pains me to ask this of you, Sir Hiro, but may I request your assistance?"

"My assistance? I don't think it's appropriate for a mere mercenary to butt into politics between two galactic empires."

"I'll allow it. Speak your mind," Colonel Serena said.

She was going along with Karasu's suggestion, perhaps viewing it as preferable to allowing Karasu himself—that incarnation of sketchiness—to keep steering the negotiations.

Oh, come on. Give me a break.

"I'll be direct," I said. "It's not like you lose anything by rolling with this. If Verthalz is fine with it, you should just accept their

generosity gratefully. Anyway, as far as the Holy Empire's concerned, they just want to eliminate dangerous space monsters as fast as possible, right?"

"That's more or less accurate, yes," Karasu answered with a serious look.

If you'd just discussed this with a grave expression from the start, rather than that suspicious smile, things would've wrapped up ages ago. Well, whatever.

"What else is there to discuss between officers out on the frontline, then?" I asked. "Politics should be left to politicians. Just report the facts and let them deal with it. If the Grakkan Empire had officially claimed this system already, things might be more complicated, but that isn't a problem this time."

"That is true, but…"

"Then that's that. Let's go get some food and call it a day. I'll treat everyone."

Colonel Serena didn't seem fully convinced, but I forcefully brought the discussion to an end. Then the imperial soldiers—led by Serena—protested annoyingly that they couldn't let a civilian buy their food during a mission. Still, I managed to shut them down by saying that I was a mercenary currently participating in that same mission, so they should treat me as a fellow soldier, not as a civilian. And as long as they paid me back later for what food cartridges they consumed, this probably wouldn't count as an illegal bribe or gift.

"I feel like I've just been hoodwinked…" Colonel Serena complained.

"Or outfoxed," I shrugged.

Serena tilted her head, seemingly not understanding the phrase I'd used. I supposed it wasn't used much in the Empire. Explaining myself would've been annoying, so I simply brushed it off. In the end, the motive behind Verthalz's actions was likely what Kugi

had mentioned in the past: That they wanted to "atone" to this world.

At one point, their ancestors had made some grave mistake that caused people like me—and monsters like the Planet Eater that Mr. Tetrahedron had sealed away—to show up. We were beings that could shake the foundations of, or even destroy, this universe.

Dealing with all the fallout of their ancestors' actions was the duty of Verthalz's citizens, or something like that. At least, that was what Kugi had said. It was the reason they didn't demand compensation when fulfilling what they considered their duty. In fact, if you managed to assist them in that duty, they were seemingly even willing to reward you. That was a bit difficult to understand for people used to the transactional relations that defined their own society.

"You shouldn't overthink it," I told Serena.

"I have to. That's my job as a high-ranking military officer. Hah…" she sighed listlessly, likely racking her brain to come up with an explanation for what had occurred that her superiors would accept.

I've got to say, working for the government seems to lead to an endless stream of trouble. My choice when I first arrived in this universe to stick to mercenary work was truly wise!

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Verthalz's fleet would apparently stay a little longer to investigate the Planet Eater's remains, Mr. Tetrahedron, and Riche III, but they'd leave immediately once they finished.

"I'll join them to report what I know, and I plan to return with them to the Holy Verthalz Empire," Konoha said, her expression serious. She carried a furoshiki she'd packed all her belongings into, just like she had when she first arrived on the *Black Lotus*. "Much happened during my short tenure with you. Thank you for having me."

"Yeah, that's true. It was nice to have you around, Konoha. Quite a novel experience."

My crew tended to pamper me, but Konoha occasionally glared at me and rebuked me, so she'd definitely been a unique presence during her time with us.

"Did you really enjoy my presence?" she asked.

"Of course. It was pretty fun watching Kugi scold you too."

Konoha gave me a deadpan glower. *Hey, I was just telling the truth.*

"Oh my… It seems that Sir Hiro has established a good relationship with Miss Konoha, in addition to Miss Seijou. Splendid, splendid. What would you think about accepting Miss Konoha into your crew as well?" Karasu asked, with his typical shady smile.

"Whoa, whoa. You can't just hand her over like she's a pet tanuki pup… But if she wanted to stay here, we'd welcome her. Konoha's strong, so I'd feel confident entrusting her with close combat and with guarding the rest of the crew," I replied, glancing over at her.

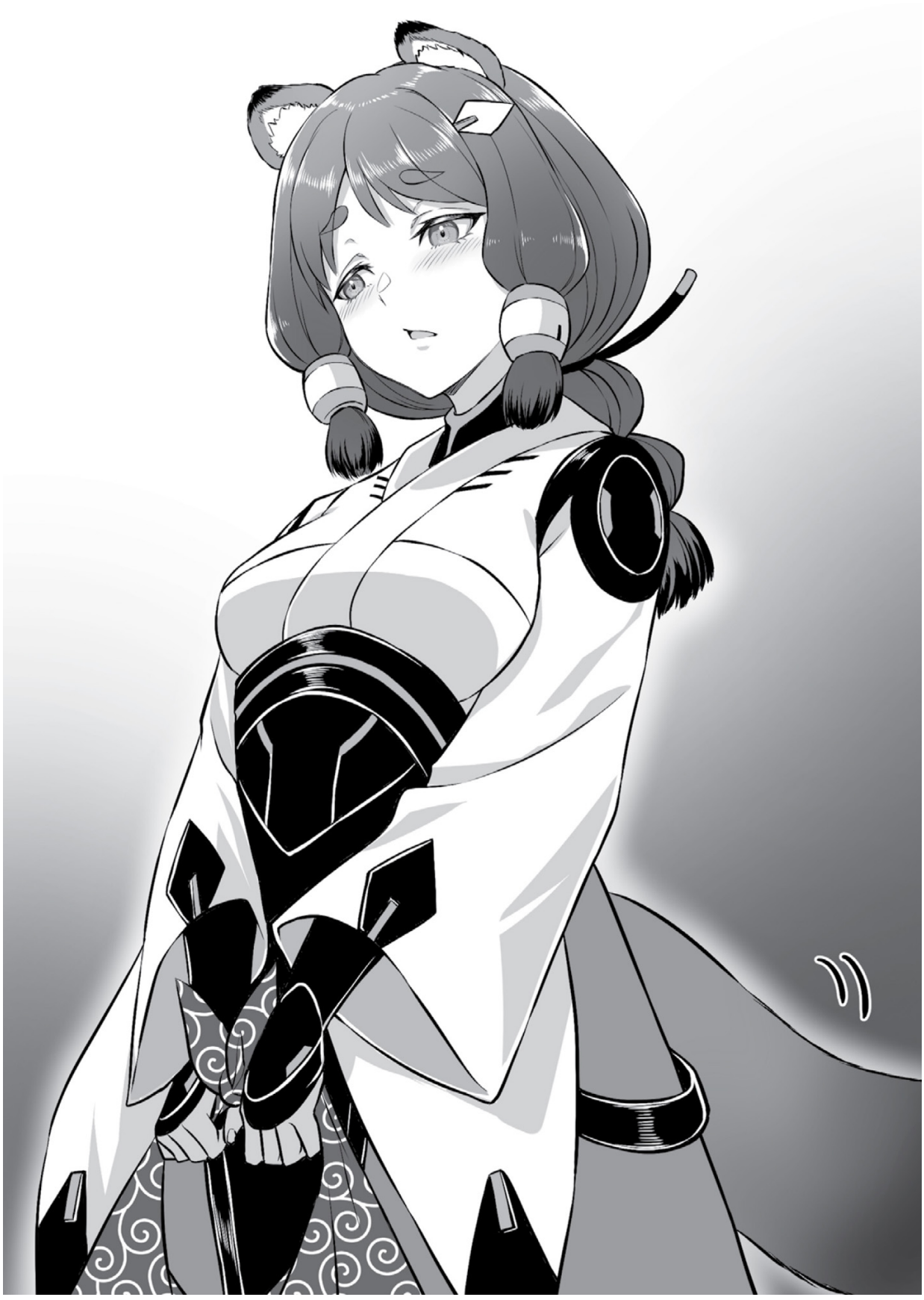
"I'm not a pet tanuki," Konoha complained. It seemed that she didn't entirely oppose the idea, however; she didn't outright refuse.

"In any case, Konoha, you work for the government, right? So I doubt you joining us would be that simple."

"Of course it wouldn't."

"Well, if you ever *do* feel like leaving your government job and living the carefree life of a mercenary, feel free to reach out to me. You have my number, right?"

"I'll…keep that in mind," she replied with a swish of her tail. *She really might not be against that.*



Chapter 2:
Revisiting the Arein System

A FEW DAYS LATER, Konoha left with Verthalz's immediate-response fleet. We spent the next two weeks exploring and cleaning up in the Riche System, then bid the Grakkan Empire's fleet farewell so we could head to the Arein System, Dr. Shouko in tow.

"You get to leave while I'm still stuck here?" Colonel Serena glared at me with a terrifying smile, the veins in her temples bulging. Still, there wasn't anything for me to do here, so there was no point in my staying. I wasn't one to hang around for no reason.

"Aren't you afraid that leaving will come back to bite you…?" Elma asked me.

"I don't bother worrying about stuff like that. It's better not to, unless you want to completely drain all your energy."

"Is that how that works?"

"I want to maintain some distance," I insisted. "Indulging her would be a bad idea."

"Yeah. It'd be a problem if you started to care about her."

"No comment."

I stopped responding to Elma's probing. After all, it was a little too on the nose. During this expedition, I'd ended up indulging Colonel Serena quite a bit; when it counted, I'd been unable to shove her aside and turn her down. If I didn't take the opportunity to distance myself from her while I could, I might end up at her beck and call. It wasn't something to be proud of, but I *was* a bit of a softie.

"All done! No problems!" Tina declared as she entered the cafeteria, looking exhausted. She wore a dress that was even plainer than usual. Wiska entered behind her in a similar outfit.

"Done with your medical checkups?" I asked. "Everything fine on your end too, Wiska?"

"Yes. No problems detected. It's Kugi's turn right now, and once she finishes it should be yours, Hiro."

"Got it. What a hassle… Actually, I guess I probably shouldn't say that."

After all, having Dr. Shouko perform checks like these ones to monitor our health was basically the entire point of having her join the crew. Treating those checks as an undesirable chore conflicted with the purpose of having her around.

"True. So what were you all talking about?" Tina asked.

"We were talking about Colonel Serena."

"Ah…the colonel?" Tina responded. "She's the type who's pretty, comes from a good family, and has high social standin' and a cute personality—yet I can't help pityin' her."

"Pitying? You *pity* her?" I asked.

"Makes sense…" Elma said. "I pity her too."

"Same here," Mimi added.

"Yeah," Tina confirmed.

For some reason, not only Elma and Mimi, but even Tina, were giving me sad looks. *Is Colonel Serena* really *a subject for pity? I guess she must be, given that they all agreed. Wait… Reading between the lines here…am* I *the reason they pity her? I* have *continually evaded her advances—but give me a break. She's not someone I could get involved with. If I made a move on her, her family would definitely have me executed.*

"By the way, was it really okay for us to just leave like that?" Wiska asked. "I can't help but feel that we left a job only half-finished."

"Nothing is better than getting paid for just lazing around," I replied, "but since we have other priorities, it was best to get moving

ASAP. We can just leave the investigation into ancient alien beings and sentient AI to them. Our priority right now is to have Dr. Shouko join our crew officially."

The Imperial Fleet had hired Dr. Shouko as a temporary researcher, but there was no longer a need for further research into the new plating material, and a method to communicate with Mr. Tetrahedron had already been developed. Thus, Dr. Shouko had applied for early dismissal. Her application had been accepted, so she'd come over to our ship, and now we were headed toward the Arein System. For Dr. Shouko to join our crew as our official ship's doctor, she would first need to resign officially from her current position as a researcher for Inagawa Technologies; we were going to Arein so that she could do so.

To be honest, it would've been totally possible for her to come along on our mercenary adventures even without taking that step, but doing that could potentially have had consequences. In the worst-case scenario, Dr. Shouko might've lost imperial citizenship, which could've led to her assets being frozen and even her doctor's license being revoked.

If she lost that license, she would no longer have been able to purchase goods that weren't sold to ordinary citizens, such as advanced drugs, medical ingredients, research equipment, and many more things. That would have been bad, and not just for her but for us too.

Thus, we were bound for Arein. Resigning from Inagawa Technologies should be a simple task, and I doubted there would be any problems… Then again, this was *us*, so we had to be prepared for anything.

"Speaking of Arein…that's quite close to the Tarmein System," Elma noted.

"The Tarmein System…" Mimi repeated with a somewhat despondent look.

That was her home system. She definitely had fond memories of it, but she likely had a lot of painful ones as well.

"I'm not sure how to feel…" she went on. "I'd kind of like to visit it again, but I also kind of don't want to."

"Yeah, makes sense," I replied. "Well, we'll be in the neighborhood, so we can drop by if we feel like it. If you get a strong urge to take a look, make sure to speak up—don't hold back. Promise me that."

"All right, Master Hiro. Thank you." As if clouds had cleared, a smile returned to Mimi's face.

That's better. I prefer to see Mimi smiling as much as possible. "Don't sweat it. I can do at least that much for you." Then I said to the others, "If anyone else wants to visit their hometown, don't hesitate to tell me. We're not struggling financially, and we can make money just fine hunting pirates as we travel around the universe."

"Traveling around the universe is typically viewed as a dangerous endeavor," Wiska noted.

"Well, it *is* hon suggestin' it," Tina replied.

The way she phrased it made it sound as if I didn't share the same common sense others had. *Well, she's not wrong.* Unfortunately, I couldn't really deny that accusation; it was essentially true.

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I woke up to the soft hum of machinery and a slight chill. As I gradually came to my senses, I soon realized I wasn't wearing any clothes. That jolted me fully conscious. I wasn't the type who preferred to be naked.

"You're awake," said a calm, pleasant voice. "I'll open the case for you."

Case? Where am I? Oh…right. I gradually began to understand the situation. Before long, I heard air depressurizing; a sense of

release accompanied that sound as warm air rushed into the case—which was a medical pod.

"Did you not get enough sleep last night? You dozed off in the pod," Dr. Shouko told me. "Hmm…you do seem a bit exhausted, or perhaps just stressed. I don't think it's anything to worry about, but it's probably a good idea to take it easy today." She smiled at me, a tablet in her hands.

As I donned my usual mercenary clothes, I took another look around the *Black Lotus*'s medical room. In the past, it had been a rather dreary place containing only a few medicine shelves and medical pods, but now there was a desk with holo-displays and a comfortable-looking ergonomic chair. The room also contained some machine of unknown purpose, as well as decorative plants, a fragrance diffuser, and Dr. Shouko's personal belongings. She'd clearly made this room her own.

"I don't think it's appropriate to examine a lady's room like that," she told me.

"Even if you've basically turned this into your own room, it's technically still part of the *Black Lotus*'s crew facilities. I gave you the storeroom next door to use as a personal space, didn't I?"

"But I spend most of my time in here and only use that room to sleep in. We might save space by just moving a bed in here."

"Stop trying to turn this room into your own personal space. We'll end up renovating things anyway once we reach a colony with a large-enough dock."

"Yeah, but…for some reason, I can't relax unless I'm in a room like this one, with medical devices or research facilities."

"You've got a severe case of workaholism," I responded wryly, sitting down across from the laughing Dr. Shouko. The simple stool I'd perched on was meant for guests and patients. *Sitting across from Dr. Shouko like this reminds me of visiting a hospital on Earth.*

"So your results," Dr. Shouko began. "There are no particular problems. Like I said earlier, your stress levels seem a little high, but it's not anything out of the ordinary. Your body's healthy to the point that your organs deserve good-boy stickers. Even today, there aren't really any drugs that can beat proper exercise and meals."

"That's good to hear. What about the rest of the crew?"

"You may be this ship's captain, but that's a personal matter. I can't divulge their personal health information. However, as their primary doctor—or rather, as the ship's doctor—I can tell you that they're all healthy and have no problems requiring immediate treatment."

"Also good to hear. But if there ever is a problem, make sure to consult with either me or Mei. Well, I guess telling Mei is a surefire way to solve *any* problem, but I'd like to know too. I start to sulk when I'm left in the dark."

"Pfft! Aye aye, sir. Is that what you want me to say?"

"Yes! Perfect answer." I gave her a thumbs-up.

"By the way…"

"Hmm? What is it?"

Dr. Shouko crossed her arms and fidgeted. "You're the last person getting a checkup today."

"I…see?"

Mei didn't need such an inspection, and Mimi and Elma had already been assessed. Tina and Wiska's checkups were done as well, and I'd come in after Kugi finished hers. That indeed made me Dr. Shouko's last patient today.

"Would you like to…take a break for a bit to relax?" Dr. Shouko asked, her face reddening.

Is…is this what I think it is? "I'd love to, but is—no, I'd be insensitive to ask directly."

I was a little taken aback by the sudden proposition, but Dr. Shouko was an adult. In approaching me, she'd taken the initiative, and it would be unmanly of me not to respond properly. A person had to play the hand they were dealt or something…right?

***

Now then… In plotting a route from that edge world to the Arein System, we'd technically had a number of paths to choose from. Traveling normally would've taken a bit too long, though, so using a gateway was in our best interest. However, that reduced our viable options to a single route.

"We'll take the closest gateway to one near the Arein System, then fly normally from there to Arein. Right?" Dr. Shouko asked, resting her tablet on a pillow.

"Well…yeah, more or less." *For pillow talk, this conversation is quite lacking…*

Yes—don't make me spell it out. What you think happened happened.

Her glasses removed, Dr. Shouko moved her face closer to mine. "It seems like you have something to say."

Yeah, she's really hot. "Well, I kind of just went with the flow, since you were the one who approached me. But I guess I'm wondering now whether that was a good decision."

"Hm? I'd say it was, although I'm a little embarrassed at my performance. It really wasn't easy to overcome the difference in experience." Dr. Shouko smirked.

"Well, thanks for the—wait, no. I mean…like…there's a proper order to things like this that should be followed, right?"

Dr. Shouko seemed momentarily surprised by that idea; then a wide smile broke out on her face. "It's not like we're teenagers trying to experience all the romantic ups and downs of a

relationship. This is fine, isn't it? I'm satisfied, at least. Aren't you, Captain?"

"Oh, I'm very satisfied too. It's just, well—putting romance aside, I guess I got a little hung up about these things in terms of love."

"Love? Love, eh…? I don't really understand love. I haven't got parents, and I've never experienced anything resembling love in all my years."

"Oh? Is this going to be a conversation about something serious?"

"That might seem serious to some people. But I think it's totally normal, and I don't really care how other people perceive it. I'm me, after all." Dr. Shouko put down her tablet and shifted to face me. "You see, I'm technically an artificial human."

"Technically?"

"Yes. My body is no different from that of a normal human woman. I can also have children the same way normal humans can. But I was born in an artificial womb made of glass and metal, in the research lab of an interstellar corporation that's no longer around."

With that as a preface, Dr. Shouko began to explain the circumstances of her birth. In a nutshell, she'd been a designer baby created by an interstellar corporation that was trying to mass-produce skilled researchers by picking and choosing superior genes.

Oh—I think I know what she's talking about. It's like that SEED thing that shows up in Mobile Suit Gundam SEED Destiny, right? The SEED factor thing where their SEED goes "Peeew!" and they suddenly power up. I see, I see. Not that Dr. Shouko has a SEED that's suddenly going to go "Peeew!"

"In the end, the company that created me ran afoul of rules regulating the creation of life or something and was shut down. I was placed into the care of the imperial government, which ran all

sorts of inspections on me before handing me over to Inagawa Technologies."

"Wow. You've lived quite a dramatic life, Dr. Shouko."

"That's all you have to say…?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Now I know why you don't really understand romance, or love, like you said. That's helped to change my own perspective a bit, and now I think it's fine to gradually develop those feelings after forming a physical connection."

If Dr. Shouko knew what I was thinking, she'd probably be mad or stunned speechless; still, I couldn't help but feel that being a genetically modified artificial human was kind of cool. Besides, Elma and other imperial nobles physically augmented their bodies through cybernetics and bionics, which in my opinion wasn't that different. Being an artificially created designer baby wasn't anything to feel ashamed of. If that was problematic, then what about *my* circumstances? I was a guy who'd just randomly ended up in this universe via unknown means. That was way weirder than being a designer baby.

"Most people get creeped out after hearing that," Dr. Shouko told me.

"It doesn't creep me out. If you don't have any misgivings about us suddenly entering an intimate physical relationship, then I don't either. We'll cross any future bridges when we get to them."

Tina, Wiska, and Kugi had been crew members for a while before I became intimate with them, but I had no misgivings when it came to Dr. Shouko. Like Elma, she was a fully independent adult. Well, I supposed that Tina and Wiska were also independent adults, but they looked like children…not that it bothered me anymore. I couldn't help feeling as though I'd opened a door that was better left closed, but there was no point crying over spilled milk.

"Oh, I recognize that look," Dr. Shouko told me. "You're thinking about other girls right now. That's no good."

She pinched my cheek, then started tugging it—quite hard. If I were a certain elf, I'd probably have been screaming in agony at that point, but I figured everyone had different—*Oh. Whoops. She literally just scolded me.*

"You're hopeless," Dr. Shouko added. "I guess I need to take back your attention by force."

"Bring it on."

I decided to stop thinking and just treasure her warmth.

***

The next morning, I woke up with Dr. Shouko and together we headed to the *Black Lotus's* lounge. There, the little dwarves ganged up on me.

"Well, it's good that things went well, hon," Tina told me. "But I'm still mad."

Wiska glared.

The pair didn't hold back their displeasure, though I could tell they weren't actually serious.

"Kugi, say something."

Tina had dragged over Kugi, who responded with rare awkwardness. "Um…well… It didn't really bother me, so…"

Whatever happened, Kugi always put me first. The way she fully accepted everything about me was borderline worrisome, and she appeared unsure of what to do when asked to voice her complaints like this.

"With you guys, it took me time because of your racial and personality differences," I explained. "And crossing the line with Kugi felt kind of risky, so… Yeah."

"Risky?"

"Uh…well, that risky vibe exists even now. It's like Kugi is totally submissive, or like she just completely embraces whoever I

am. It feels like, if I said something was white, she'd agree with me, even if it was really black. Am I making sense…?"

"Mm…hmm…" Tina glanced at Kugi. "Yeah, I kinda get where you're coming from. But I don't think Kugi worships you blindly."

Kugi nodded. "Tina is right, my lord. Although I adore you, I would do my best to correct you if you strayed from the rightful path. Serving with sincerity is not the same thing as blind loyalty."

I hesitated. "Well, your deep loyalty and favor are too dazzling sometimes."

I wasn't just referring to Kugi's choice of the word "adore." She constantly radiated positive thought waves about me, so I couldn't help but wince sometimes. What do I mean by "positive thought waves"? Well, she basically emitted an "I love you, I love you" aura that was always crashing into me. It was a bit much to handle at times.

As I reeled at Kugi's barrage of positive thought waves, Wiska dove into my lap. *Crap… I ignored her for too long.*

"Meow…"

"Pwfff!" Monopolizing my lap, Wiska had shifted, looked up at me, and mewed. *Why is she so cute?!*

"W-Wiska?! H-how sly! I can't believe…! What a terrifying girl!" Tina exclaimed.

"I know I'm the one who did it, but that was super embarrassing!" Wiska said, blushing and covering her face with both hands.

Mimi, Elma, and Dr. Shouko watched us from over in the cafeteria. I was curious as to what those three were talking about… but the atmosphere seemed fine, so I figured there probably wouldn't be any problems.

"Stop thinking about Dr. Shouko and pay us some attention too," Tina told me. "Fairness is an important virtue."

"Okay, okay. So that's an invitation to come over tonight, right?"

"No—well, yes, but…! Dang it!"

"Gah! Wait! Don't punch me! That actually hurt!"

Tina had jabbed me out of embarrassment, and it seriously ached. Well, at the very least, I could look forward to this trip not being a boring one. I needed to make sure the girls didn't get bored with *me* either.

***

Our journey proceeded smoothly. We reached the closest gateway without problems, and we didn't have to wait long before we could activate it. We'd stopped by a colony en route, but we hadn't run into any problems with local mercenaries or gangsters; we'd traded and resupplied without issue. It really had been smooth sailing.

"Things are going well, so how come you guys seem more and more concerned?" Dr. Shouko asked during a meal. She seemingly couldn't hold that question in any longer.

Oh, so you noticed.

Tina answered with a wry smile. "Ya see, Doctor, hon tends to draw trouble toward him," she explained. "Best to be prepared."

I'll leave that to you, then.

"I'm aware of that, but…" Dr. Shouko trailed off. "Oh—so you mean that right now is the calm before the storm?"

"You're a smart one, Doctor! Last time things were like this was… That's right! Back when we were in the Leafil System."

"Please stop," I protested. "Don't remind me of that."

That situation really had been bad. It wasn't unusual for us to discover pirates the moment we entered a system, and it wasn't a bad thing that that had led the elves to welcome us. But then we'd

ridden that weird aerial car that crash-landed in a primeval forest, which was followed by space pirates suddenly attacking the planet, after which Colonel Serena showed up to drag us into a major pirate subjugation mission. When we'd finished that mission, we'd been targeted by a crazy woman; there was an 80 or 90 percent chance that she'd been those subjugated pirates' leader or something. It had been absolutely crazy.

That last bit had been especially bad. It wouldn't have bothered me too much if she'd only gone after me, but the thought that she might target one of my crew members was terrifying. That was pretty much one of the only moments when I'd felt that I wasn't strong enough.

"I don't think being on edge all the time will help. Whatever happens, happens," Elma shrugged.

"It's true that we can't do much before that kind of situation, since we don't even know what'll happen," Mimi added with a wry smile.

They're right. Since we can't predict the future, we can't do anything to prevent it. But I can't shake the feeling that the longer things are smooth sailing, the bigger the problem will be once it shows up. "Kugi, is there any way to, like, use my abilities to improve the situation?" I asked. "If we're ever going to use a grandiose ability like fate manipulation, I figure now's the time."

"If that were possible, it would indeed be ideal, my lord. However, it likely isn't feasible."

"What makes you say that?"

"To consciously manipulate fate, you must be able to consciously perceive it. You currently only manipulate fate unconsciously, my lord."

"So even if Hiro possesses the ability to manipulate fate, he can't really use it if he can't perceive fate," Dr. Shouko noted. "Hmm…very interesting. I wonder what the scientific principle behind manipulating fate is."

As if recent events had piqued her interest in psionic technology, Dr. Shouko would immediately jump into any conversation related to the topic. She was one of those people who got excited whenever they encountered something they didn't really understand—a true researcher to the core.

"I am not very familiar with the particulars of fate manipulation," Kugi replied. "The prior users of such an ability can be counted on one hand, and there isn't much established research on the topic."

"I like the sound of that. It means there are valuable discoveries to be made. Tell me more about the few real examples of people using that ability."

"Very well; I'm able to do that."

Dr. Shouko was getting along well with the rest of the crew. She'd talk about mercenary life with Mimi and Elma, then switch to technical topics with Tina and Wiska, then switch again to discuss psionic technology with Kugi. *As for Mei… I'm not sure. What* does *she talk about with Mei? Come to think of it, I don't see those two together often.*

"Dwelling on this is a waste of time, since we can't do anything about it," I said. "That doesn't stop us from thinking about it, though…"

"That feeling when we reach our destination without anything happening, and it's like 'Of *course* nothing happened,' is really the worst," Elma added.

"All we can really do is stock up on supplies and make sure our equipment's in tip-top shape," Mimi concluded.

Me, Elma, and Mimi—the three original crew members—heaved a collective sigh. Us three being this way definitely put a damper on the ship's atmosphere, which was why Dr. Shouko had gotten worried and confronted us about it. Still, if someone else had experienced the things we had, they couldn't have helped sighing either. Even if it *didn't* help any.

"Okay. Let's change gears," I said. "Not that we should get complacent, but just sighing all the time won't help."

"You make that sound so easy," Elma remarked. "Got a plan…?"

"There are a lot of fancy food-processing factories on Arein Tertius. When we arrive, let's go all out and eat and drink whatever we want. We'll have a party. Dr. Shouko will join us as an official crew member soon, so let's hold a welcome bash for her."

The look in Elma's eyes immediately changed, and not only hers. Tina and Wiska perked up right away, and fire glittered in Mimi's eyes too.

"How lavish are we talking? What's our budget? You're paying, right?"

"Booze."

"Alcoholic drinks."

"Master Hiro! Last time we were on Arein Tertius, I saw something called 'kobe beef.' I want to try it!"

"Gah! You guys are freaking me out! Calm down!"

The alcoholics and foodaholic had immediately begun pressing me for details. *It's not like you guys lack for food or alcohol, so how come you're acting so frantic?!*

"Nothing's as delicious as wining and dining on someone else's cash!" the four chanted in unison.

"Ah…okay." Faced with their bright smiles, I didn't have the heart to argue anymore. *I doubt they could spend more than five digits, which would be a low price to pay—well, for mercenaries, not normal people—if it boosted morale.*

***

The Arein System contained two habitable planets, three research colonies, and a trade colony. One of those habitable planets

had been adjusted to boast a year-round warm climate, making it perfect for agriculture. Thus, it had a bustling, efficient, and high-tech agricultural sector focused mainly on producing luxury foods.

The other habitable planet suffered vicious storms constantly, making it a difficult place to live, but that apparently also provided a specific environment perfect for certain scientific experiments, so it became a major research hub. *Well, given the Empire's technological level, I'm sure any structures they create there can handle the environment. And they could always use shields if necessary, so living there probably isn't that challenging.* Hm? What about that research colony? Those places were stations that only research lunatics visited; they apparently didn't contain a single entertainment facility. At least, according to Elma.

"Wow. How nostalgic," Dr. Shouko said happily as she looked around the port district.

We'd just touched down on Arein Tertius. The port district's first level, hangar bays included, was a dark place with lighting meant to emulate nighttime. I wasn't sure why that was, so I asked the former resident.

"Oh, the first level's always dark because some races are uncomfortable with light," Dr. Shouko explained. "You know how some humans are effectively nocturnal? This floor was made to cater to nocturnal races and to those humans. Haters sometimes call them creeps or loners, but a lot of them are just really thoughtful, and they're typically very gentle people."

"I see. The people in charge here do their best to cater to different needs," I noted.

"You don't see that often elsewhere," Elma said.

"That feature is probably unique to Arein, since research is the system's main 'product,'" Dr. Shouko remarked.

We continued to chat idly as we walked down the street as a group. This was the rare outing in which the entire crew, including Mei, participated. Arein Tertius was a pretty safe colony, and we'd

been here before, so the lay of the land was familiar. *Well, the place was a mess last time we were here, since monsters were attacking it. But that's not something that happens every day.*

"This system's reputation for bein' high-tech ain't unearned," Tina exclaimed.

"The ceiling feels a bit high," Wiska commented. "I don't really like it."

Tina seemed quite excited to be here, while Wiska came off as somewhat uneasy as she gazed up at the colony's high ceiling. *That's quite a unique perspective. I've heard of claustrophobia; is she feeling something like agoraphobia? That doesn't sound right either. Maybe dwarves are just instinctively uncomfortable in spaces with raised ceilings?*

"Structural upgrades on the *Black Lotus*; the installation of research equipment and proper medical facilities; party preparations; and equipment maintenance, including maintenance for me… We have a lot of tasks before us today, Master."

Mei seemed unusually excited, as it had been a while since we'd had so much to do. By the way, the "equipment maintenance" she mentioned included maintaining the combat bots from Eagle Dynamics. Tina and Wiska had adjusted those bots to be capable of maintenance as well, so I couldn't help worrying that the store would refuse to service them.

As a side note, since we probably couldn't stay on the *Black Lotus* while it was being worked on, we'd reserved rooms at a hotel. We could simply have stayed on the *Krishna* and *Antlion*, but since the hotel option was available, we'd decided instead to book rooms in a nice one where we could rest properly.

On that edge world, we'd never been able to really kick back and relax. The *Dauntless* had basic entertainment facilities, but the *Black Lotus*'s lounge was far more comfortable, so our crew had elected to stay on our ship for most of the expedition.

"This is a good place to shop."

"Yeah… There're so many different stores."

"It can't compete with the capital. Still, they seem to be selling more interesting things here than in the Wyndas System—goods sold there tend to have military uses."

"Master Hiro. *That* store. We should take the crew there."

"Which one? Wait… Ah. *That* store, huh? That's a good idea, Mimi. A very good idea."

Mimi was likely referring to the store that offered Lolita fashion. Mimi rarely wore that attire for me; still, dressing up the entire crew in those outfits…was truly a very good idea. A *wonderful* idea. Although Elma would likely give me some pushback, I very much wanted to see her wear one. Being so small, Tina and Wiska would definitely look amazing, and Kugi was practically made for such clothes. As for Mei and Dr. Shouko…would they look good? Yeah, I was certain they would. The possibilities were endless.

"I'm getting a bad feeling about this…" Elma said.

"You're just imagining things. For now, let's check into the hotel."

We'd booked our rooms for two weeks, and we'd already sent our luggage ahead through the inter-colony freight system, so all we had to do was check in and register an electronic key to our personal terminals. I had informed the hotel that we might extend our stay beyond a fortnight, and they'd told me immediately that that was fine. My reputation apparently worked in our favor.

"Seems like I became famous at some point."

"You really don't pay much attention to what others say about you," Elma said, somewhat astonished. "Your reputation's pretty decent, just so you know. The general consensus is that you're a gentle guy who seldom gets into fights with regular people. You're one of the good platinum-rankers."

I turned to her in confusion. "I'm a good platinum-ranker? I seldom fight regular people? I had quite a few run-ins with those

guys from Space Dwergr. I even made them kneel and apologize."

"But you haven't gotten violent with someone for no reason, nor have you used the threat of violence to intimidate anybody. You also haven't ended up in trouble while drunk or gotten into fistfights with normal people. Plus, you haven't forcibly dragged women aboard your ship and gotten rough with them."

"Of course I haven't! What the hell? I'm not a turn-of-the-century Mohawk-sporting gangster."

"The way you recoil at the very idea of such actions is why people think you're a good platinum-ranker."

If having normal sensibilities was enough to cause people to see me as among the "good" mercenaries, then the others must've been quite unruly. Were most mercenaries the "If you look down on me, I'll kill you!" type? *Yikes…* That didn't make sense, though; the mercenaries I'd met hadn't given me that impression.

"The mercenary guild punishes offenders who act too out of line," Elma continued. "Besides, you mainly hunt pirates for bounties. The only missions you've taken on were direct requests from either the military or nobles, so you've only run into relatively upstanding mercenaries in your work."

"I see…" I still wasn't all that familiar with the sensibilities of this universe's mercenaries, so having Elma around was a godsend at times like these.

"By the way, this is common knowledge that even Mimi is familiar with," Elma added.

"What…?" I gasped at this shocking revelation.

"Mimi actually studies, unlike a certain someone."

"Everyone's got their own strengths and weaknesses…" *Please stop looking at me as if I was dropped on my head as a child. It actually kind of hurts my feelings.*

"After we check into our rooms, my lord, what plans do we have for the day?"

I thought for a moment before answering, "Hmm… It'll probably be best if we split into three groups safeguarded by Elma, Mei, and me. Dr. Shouko, you made your appointment with Inagawa Technologies, right?"

"Yes. Mei helped me prepare the resignation documents, and I already informed Inagawa of my intentions. We scheduled a meeting for today."

"In that case, I'll head to Inagawa Technologies with you," I decided. "It's only right that I meet with them as your future captain, since you'll be joining my crew."

"I'll accompany you, my lord," Kugi said.

"I'll lead the group shopping for the food and drink we'll need for the party," Elma volunteered. "Mimi, you're with me, right?"

"Yes!"

"I'll come too!" Tina said.

"I will stay in our rooms and arrange for the ship's upgrades," said Mei. "I may go to visit the dealer in person."

"I'll stay behind with Mei and help her with the necessary arrangements," said Wiska.

That was that. I'd go with Dr. Shouko and Kugi to Inagawa Technologies, and Elma, Mimi, and Tina would shop for food and alcohol, while Mei and Wiska would get to work arranging to overhaul the *Black Lotus*.

"Make sure to contact the other groups if anything happens," I reminded them.

"Aye aye, sir," they all chorused.

Once we finish at Inagawa, I should probably meet up with Mei's group. I'll have to approve their expenditures, after all. At any rate, checking into the hotel will be the first step.

***

"Oh ho… So this is what it's like inside?"

"I hear that most hotels designed for nobles are like this."

After we'd set down our luggage, Dr. Shouko had begun looking around the rooms we'd booked, Wiska tailing her not far behind. Although Wiska was a skilled mechanic on par with Tina, she was more a researcher or inventor than a pure technician. She was better suited to researching and developing new designs than to working with her hands. She got along very well with Dr. Shouko, a genuine researcher, and these days it wasn't uncommon to see Wiska follow her around.

"How does that make you feel, as her older sister?" I asked Tina.

"It does make me a little sad, but I think it's a good thing," she replied with a faint smile.

I was sitting on a sofa, and Tina had thrown herself into my lap. She was an outgoing girl; that was why she'd been able to break the ice with the rest of the crew quickly. In contrast, Wiska was rather shy. Of course, she'd been part of the crew for a while, so she'd become acquainted with everyone; still, she'd spent most of her time with her older sister, Tina. When Wiska wasn't with her sister, it had been because she'd shut herself into her room to research or work on something. Nowadays, however, she often headed to Dr. Shouko's room or followed her around, like she was doing right at this moment.

"Yeah," I agreed, "It's probably good."

"I'll use you to make up for the hole Wis left by not hanging out with us!" Tina looked up at me from my lap, a mischievous grin on her face.

I patted her head. "Yeah, yeah, fine. I'll pay attention to you."

"These types of rooms are all very similar," Kugi noted.

"Uh-huh. They're decorated in what you could call the 'imperial style,'" Elma replied. "Other countries tend to find these kinds of

rooms too plain and unimaginative."

Those two sat across from Tina and I, assessing the large, luxurious room; it was the chamber's layout and furnishings that Kugi had referred to as "very similar." In the Wyndas System, where I'd met Kugi, I'd also rented a large space meant for nobles—you could've called it a suite or penthouse. There were some differences between what I'd booked then and the rooms we'd taken this time, but the layout and furnishings were almost identical.

"I guess you could say this really has the 'imperial noble' vibe," noted Dr. Shouko. "A more generous interpretation of the style entails admiration for how it strongly emphasizes tradition and social status."

"I see. So all the rooms being the same is unavoidable."

"Yes. You could also say it's pragmatic. After all, colonies only have so much space, so even nobles need to accept some limitations."

In a planet's residential areas, you could use as much lateral and horizontal space as you wanted—well, you couldn't, but you were afforded a lot more freedom. Colonies had fixed ceilings and limited space, though, so even the spatial luxuries nobles could afford were strictly limited. Of course, if they put up enough money, it would change things, but not many nobles were likely willing to go to such extremes while merely staying at a hotel where they'd spend only a few days or, at most, a month. That was likely what had given rise to this concept of a standard colonial hotel for nobles.

"I'm done choosing!" Mimi declared, rising from her chair. She'd been sitting at a table by herself, using her tablet.

"All right, then let's get moving."

It would've been fine for each group to leave in their own time. Dr. Shouko's appointment with Inagawa Technologies wasn't for a while, though, and we weren't in a rush to get the *Black Lotus*'s upgrades finished, so we'd decided to head out after Mimi chose stores to purchase stuff like booze from.

"I'll make sure to get us the best food and drinks!" she added.

"Glad to hear it, but please don't choose anything too bizarre—actually, never mind."

Occasionally Mimi acquired "bizarre" items for us that looked nothing like food but were supposedly edible; they'd all ended up being quite delicious. By now, the longstanding crew members and I had gotten used to such selections, so we'd surely be fine. However, they might challenge Kugi and Dr. Shouko, who were still new to the group.

Thinking back, Kugi's first time facing one of Mimi's bizarre dishes had been quite a spectacle. Her fox ears had trembled, her tails visibly bristling in revulsion; she'd stared at the dish in slack-jawed disbelief with fangs—maybe her canines—visible. When I'd pointed that out to her, she'd immediately covered her ears and blushed.

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Inagawa Technology's office building was separate from the hospital where Mimi, Elma, and I had met Dr. Shouko, but it was pretty close by.

"What kind of products does Inagawa Technology make?" I asked Dr. Shouko as we sat in the inter-colony transport system's rattling car.

"Hm? Hm… I guess they mainly sell cutting-edge medical devices and biotechnological services, but they also deal in nanomachine technology. They're what you'd call a bionics company."

"A bionics company?" Kugi asked, confused.

I wasn't sure what that referred to either, although I had an inkling. After all, at this point, the topic of physically enhanced nobles had come up multiple times.

"That means that a company's research and products are mainly in the field of the biological sciences: for example, genetic engineering or performance-enhancing drugs. Companies focused on replacing body parts with superior artificial limbs, on the other hand, would be referred to as *cybernetic* companies. Inagawa Technologies offers drugs and chemical goods as side products, while cybernetic companies offer electronic devices and robots as side products. But both tend to offer certain nanomachine and medical equipment services that don't clearly fall onto either side."

"I see. I understand now," Kugi said. "Given that distinction, would psionic technologies be more the province of bionics or cybernetics?"

"That question's hard to answer, but I'd say they lean toward bionics."

Kugi was surprisingly intellectual—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she hungered for knowledge. As a shrine maiden, she'd been raised in an environment isolated from the secular world, spending her days training in spiritual matters, so she was a somewhat sheltered girl. Perhaps as a result, she was very curious. She seemed to hunger for knowledge of the outside world.

Noticing my gaze, Kugi became embarrassed and said regretfully, "My sincerest apologies, my lord. How unbecoming of me."

"You didn't do anything warranting an apology. I was just impressed by the effort you put into learning new things. Don't mind me—do as you please."

"Yes, my lord," Kugi answered with a blush, appearing to shrink inwardly.

Hmm…not good. I need to be less obvious in the future.

"Pfft! Your captain doesn't mind, so there's no need for you to feel embarrassed," Dr. Shouko told her. "I'll talk with you about whatever you want, assuming you don't get tired of me. Feel free to drop by whenever you wish. I'm technically the ship's doctor, but

everyone aboard is healthy, so there's actually not a lot of work for me to do. Let's both learn new things together. How about it?"

"All right…!"

Kugi's fox ears perked up. She glanced over at me, and when I gave her a nod, her face brightened. I wanted her to learn as much as she could without needing to worry about what I thought. After all, what she learned could ultimately come back around and prove helpful to me.

I felt the train car slow down as it reached our destination. At some point, I'd become extremely sensitive to changes in acceleration.

"Looks like we're about to arrive."

"Hm? Oh, you're right. Make sure not to forget anything."

"All right!"

Sometime while staying with us, Dr. Shouko had managed to tame not only Wiska, but Kugi as well. Was she actually a professional conwoman? Well, in any case, it was a good thing. It was important that the crew trust and feel comfortable around the ship's doctor. People weren't willing to entrust their body to someone they were dubious of. I had to do my best to ensure that Dr. Shouko officially joined our crew.

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"There's no changing your mind about this…?"

"Nope, there isn't."

"I see…"

We'd gotten to Inagawa Technologies slightly before our appointment, but they'd prepped for our arrival in advance, so we were immediately shown to a meeting room. Rather than a reception room, we were taken to a chamber that looked like an important company executive's office. Upon entering, we were greeted by the

sight of an office desk that likely had a holo-display built in; in front of that was a comfortable-looking sofa. A table made of glasslike material matched the sofa's height, although I wasn't sure whether it was actually made of glass.

Across that table, we now faced a stern-looking older-middle-aged man who had a bearing similar to that of Chris's grandfather, Count Dalenwald. According to what Dr. Shouko had told us in advance, this man was her direct superior and doubled as her foster father.

At the moment, he sat glaring at me. "It seems you did a thorough job of seducing her away from us."

"I never really had that kind of intention; things just ended up like this. Still, I'm not going to apologize." I faced the man's glare head-on, glowering right back.

"I understand your position and standing," he told me. "But wouldn't you agree that it'd be better for you to show some humility here, for the sake of fostering a cordial relationship?"

"It might be, but my position still demands that I prioritize Dr. Shouko's wishes. Apologizing would sully those wishes and the courage she's shown, so I'm not going to. Since things turned out like this, though, I'll do whatever's in my power to protect her and ensure that she doesn't regret this decision. I'll act in a way that lets me live up to her expectations. I'm willing to promise that here."

The man—who'd introduced himself as Dixon—stared at me for a while before looking downward and sighing in defeat. "I knew that one day, when Shouko found someone to marry, I'd have to see her off as a bride. But I didn't expect a mercenary of all people to steal her from me."

"Bride?! Um, Father…Hiro and I aren't… Wait, *are* we like that?" Dr. Shouko asked, cocking her head at me.

"I'm fully prepared to take responsibility," I told her with a nod.

I was ready to at least do that much. After all, there was a weird attitude in this universe regarding a woman who boarded a man's ship. I was welcoming Dr. Shouko aboard fully understanding that implication, so assuming responsibility for my actions was only natural. Not that I had any choice either way at this point.

Dr. Shouko blushed. "I see…I see," she said. "So that's how it is. Makes sense. I'm starting to feel shy…"

Very cute. Did Dr. Shouko only join us as a fellow comrade to sail among the stars? Probably—I doubt she put much thought into it. "That said, I don't plan to strut around as your husband or anything," I added. "These things take time, and there's a certain process to them."

"Ah ha ha…For a mercenary who flies from one star to the next, you have an awfully cautious, reliable personality, Hiro," Dr. Shouko told me.

As Mr. Dixon watched her converse with me, his stern face softened somewhat. "I didn't expect a man to show up who could make Shouko laugh like you do. She seems quite determined to go through with this, so I doubt anything I say will make a difference. Her paperwork has also been handled perfectly, so I have no way of stopping her either."

"Thank you, Father. By the way, Hiro… What number am I among your wives?"

"Huh?" the expressions of confusion from Mr. Dixon and I overlapped.

"Mimi's going to be your legal wife, right? No—perhaps it will be Elma, given her social position? Assuming they're numbers one and two, next would be Mei, right? You seem like the type to treat an AI as an independent person."

"Um…Dr. Shouko?" I tried to stop her, since I could see Mr. Dixon's expression grow increasingly sour as she rambled on.

"After that would be Tina and Wiska, and of course Kugi as the newest crew member."

Sitting next to me, Kugi nodded. "Yes, Lady Shouko, I'm the newest member."

"Which makes me number seven. So I'd be your seventh wife? I doubt even many nobles have that many wives," Dr. Shouko said with a hearty laugh.

Mr. Dixon was also all smiles now. "Although I'm only Shouko's foster father, I consider her my daughter. So as the father of the woman being wed to you as your seventh wife, I believe I should introduce my fist to your face. In fact, I feel that duty requires me to do so."

"Please, anything but that…"

I raised my hands in surrender as Mr. Dixon's clenched fists visibly trembled in rage. There was nothing incorrect about what Dr. Shouko had said, but I had no intention of ranking my wives. I planned to love them all equally. That was what I'd meant by "taking responsibility." *Please forgive me.*

Chapter 3:
Why Me?

IN A VOICE THAT ONLY DR. SHOUKO and Kugi could hear, I whispered, "I thought that'd take longer."

We were now a short distance from Inagawa Technologies. Though Mr. Dixon had berated me a bit for my womanizing ways, he hadn't tried to stop Dr. Shouko from leaving.

"My paperwork was in order, and I already handed all my tasks off to others when I transferred to the military," Dr. Shouko explained. "My background factored in too. Surprisingly enough, the Empire is unexpectedly understanding—or I guess sympathetic—toward me. In any case, they tend to be rather nice. I'm basically guaranteed the freedom to decide where I want to work."

"That really is quite surprising."

"Besides, they'd have nothing to gain by forcing me to be somewhere I didn't want to be. In fact, if they did force me and my personality got twisted as a result, it'd be bad for them. Assuming my brain kept operating as it was intended to, I might escape their clutches and engage in some shady research they'd rather not see."

"I see…" I said uncertainly. "There *are* plenty of ways to forcibly bend people to your wishes…"

Since you could physically enhance your body to transcend commonplace human limitations, you could probably also control people through brain implants or something.

"Yeah—but just as there are ways to do that, there are also ways to undo it and evade detection, and people like me are especially good at finding such ways."

"They're aiming for loyalty over subjugation, eh?"

"Yes. Still, it's not like the Empire leaves me entirely to my own devices. For a while they had someone monitoring me, and I have mandatory mental wellness checks."

"Mental wellness checks?"

"Think of them as mental surveys. They guide me to a room and analyze me mentally. They place a specialized investigation device inside the room that prevents me from consciously experiencing the analysis, and through that analysis, they can basically get an accurate look at what's going on in my head."

"Yikes…" *What about freedom of thought? And if they found something wrong with you, what would happen? Spooky…* "While we're on the topic," I said, "you know a lot about the tech and internal secrets at Inagawa Technologies, right? Will that be a problem?"

"All the devices I had that contained any sensitive information, I returned. They can't do anything about what's in my head, but that's what NDAs are for."

"So memory manipulation is still a bridge too far, at the very least."

"That's not impossible to do, but our personalities are closely tied to our memories, so…"

"Stop. I'm getting chills." *So…messing with someone's brain by, say, erasing their memories would affect their personality? It might make them an entirely different person in some cases…? That's terrifying.*

"I see," said Kugi. "So that's how things are."

"Do things work differently where you're from, Kugi?"

"Well, I've heard that certain methods can be used in my country to seal away one's memories."

"Oh? Psionic technology brings about new possibilities, and that would be one of them," Dr. Shouko responded. "Sealing rather than erasing… Is that something like hypnosis?"

Kugi simply smiled, choosing not to answer the question, which likely meant that Dr. Shouko wasn't far off the mark. Kugi was a user of the second magic—psionic abilities affecting the mind—so she might have an in-depth understanding of such techniques, or even be capable of using them.

"Whoa—how terrifying! Hiro, you mustn't ever make Kugi mad, okay?"

"Yeah. That's old news." I knew from personal experience just how powerful Kugi's second magic was. I wasn't interested in having her expose any more of my embarrassing memories.

"So what should we do now?" Dr. Shouko asked. "Regroup with Mei, as planned?"

"Let's do that. Your input will likely be invaluable in designing the medical and research—" I froze mid-sentence, carefully examining our surroundings.

I wasn't sure why, but a chill had just gone down my spine, and the nape of my neck tingled. The sensation was similar to what I felt when a skilled pilot managed to get behind me and lock on to my ship. This was murderous intent. There was no mistaking it—I could clearly feel thought waves that declared someone's intention to kill me. I also sensed that the person emitting those thought waves was extremely skilled.

"Hiro?"

"It seems that someone especially dangerous is targeting me…"

"Hostility… It's quite intense as well." Kugi must've detected the same emotions I did. Her ears flicked around as she likewise examined our surroundings.

"Hostility?" Dr. Shouko repeated. "But isn't making enemies a natural part of mercenary life?"

"Well, I'm quite well behaved, you know? I haven't really done anything that warrants this level of hostility, unless it's coming from

a space pirate or something."

It was also possible that the hostile party was a noble. In the capital, I'd been forced to participate in a tournament, and during that event I'd beaten up a few nobles and knights. One of those competitors might still hold a grudge against me. This might also have something to do with the Dalenwald family.

"What should we do?"

"At times like this, it's best to just run away…but let's regroup with Mei first. We want Mei around in situations that might result in close combat."

It would've been ideal to take shelter inside a shielded ship, but the *Black Lotus* was about to undergo upgrades, and we couldn't fit the entire crew onto the *Krishna*.

Actually, that might be possible if we crammed everybody in, but we should only do that in the worst-case scenario. "Dr. Shouko, message Mimi and the others. Tell them an unknown enemy may be targeting us, so they need to stop shopping and regroup with Mei immediately."

"Okey-doke."

As Dr. Shouko took her terminal out of her pocket to contact Mimi, I heightened my vigilance, prepared to unsheathe the sword or laser gun at my waist at a moment's notice. I doubted that this individual would strike in the middle of a populated city, but there was no guarantee that they wouldn't.

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I clicked my tongue when I saw the man and the young girl with whitish fox ears—likely a citizen of Verthalz—suddenly look around, scanning their surroundings.

"Tch…they've sure got good instincts. This'll be tricky."

I'd lost control of my murderous intent for a moment, but the way they'd reacted and gone on guard immediately was completely

abnormal. Even well-enhanced nobles wouldn't have noticed my momentary lapse at such a distance.

"Are they psychics? How annoying…"

The universe was big; still, not many people had awakened psionic powers. Certain races like elves possessed such powers naturally, but only a handful of people in the entire universe could detect an enemy at such a distance.

"He's turned out to be a much bigger deal than I expected…"

I'd searched around assuming that this man was a small fry, but apparently he was actually a big shot. I should just have asked the mercenary guild from the start. He was probably some kind of shut-in, since he was rarely seen in public.

"Having gotten a late start is really beginning to sting…"

I had traveled a bit far, but I'd still never dreamed that so much would change in just a few years. It was true that this place wasn't exactly safe, but given my circumstances, somewhere closer to the center wouldn't have been convenient. On top of that, the people involved had been systematically purged, so tracing the threads had taken time.

"Captain, Target Alpha has begun moving."

"Continue to monitor them. Don't let them notice you. The bandit may be psychic, so deploy anti-psionic equipment while monitoring."

"That's annoying… But I'll retrieve some from the ship."

"Do that. But for now, make do with a mental wave disruption helmet."

It wasn't clear what abilities he had, but since he could detect hostility from that far away, he was probably a telepath. In that case, mental wave disruption equipment would keep us from being detected, and it should also limit his ability to affect us telepathically.

"You're not getting away… I make sure to settle my accounts," I whispered as I observed the vigilant target—Captain Hiro—from afar.

Don't worry. Gran's coming to save you.

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The individual with hostile intent seemed to have backed off, so we hurried to the shipyard near the port, where Mei and Wiska were. Arein Tertius didn't focus much on ship manufacturing, but it produced and sold high-tech modules for such vessels. As a result, the shipbuilding industry also flourished, which resulted in Arein Tertius boasting a large shipyard. Such a shipyard naturally attracted ship dealers, and Mei and Wiska had decided to go there first to gather information on facilities that met our needs.

"How come someone's targeting you?" Kugi asked.

"I have no idea. I suppose I have some guesses, though."

"I thought your conduct as a mercenary was irreproachable?" Dr. Shouko teased me.

"It's precisely *because* my conduct is irreproachable that reproachable people hate me."

At the very least, whoever was targeting me wasn't part of a reputable organization. But I didn't know whether they were a space pirate, an unruly noble, or a member of some third category. *Hmm… we've technically already done what we came here for. We don't necessarily* have *to renovate the* Black Lotus *here. It might be a bit more expensive, but we could probably get comparable or even superior furnishings from the Wyndas System. Wyndas is a bit close to the capital, though—and if the honorable frigging emperor knew I was around again, there's no telling what he'd decide to do.*

"For now, keep your guard up," I instructed. "I can tell that they'll make a move at some point."

"Oh? You can glean that much with your psionic powers?"

"Well, I've improved my powers to the extent that even Professor Kugi has given me her stamp of approval. I'm nowhere near as good at handling the finer points as she is, but in terms of raw power and psionic sensitivity, I've gotten pretty good."

Since Dr. Shouko seemed quite interested in the topic, I gave her a lengthy explanation. Those "finer points" I'd mentioned were actually very important when it came to the second magic. If I were to try directly connecting to someone's mind, as Kugi could, I'd probably end up destroying them.

"So it's pretty much certain, then?"

"It'd be a good idea to operate under that assumption. You agree, right, Kugi?"

"Yes, my lord," Kugi replied with a serious look. "That was clearly murderous intent directed at you." I'd figured that already, and Kugi seemed to think the same thing.

While we conversed, we arrived at the port district. It was as dark as usual, but bright lights illuminated the area where ship dealers congregated. That lighting was more artificial than natural, but it was definitely pretty brilliant.

"Mei and the others…are visiting that dealer over there."

After glancing around, I'd spotted them at a dealer that commanded a store that was especially large even among the other dealers present. Space was limited in colonies, so a store's size was a good barometer for its success. After all, maintaining a larger establishment was more expensive.

"Know anything about that store?" I asked Dr. Shouko.

"I may be a local, but that doesn't mean I know anything about shops I've never visited before. I'm kind of a shut-in, you know…?"

"I see." That made sense. I used to ride a bike, but it wasn't as if I'd known anything about local bicycle dealers where I lived.

"Let's go in, my lord."

"Okay."

Surprisingly, Kugi wasn't the type to shrink from entering a store for the first time. Although she behaved rather unobtrusively, she proactively explored new stores. Based on the movements of her ears and tails, she appeared to enjoy the experience. She was a bundle of curiosity with strong self-control.

"Wow."

"Oh, impressive."

Entering the store, we looked around. Directly in front of us was a staffed counter, to the left was a glassed-in workshop, and to the right was what looked like a showroom. The man standing behind the counter was looking over at us, so we headed toward him.

"Welcome, honored guests," he said.

"Hey. Our companions—a Maidroid and a female dwarf—should've arrived here before us. Could you take us to them? They're part of my crew."

"Understood. Please wait while I confirm that." The man offered a quick bow before operating the counter's holo-terminal. Before long, he nodded and turned back to us. "I've received confirmation. Your companions are on the inner-left side of the showroom to the right, in Meeting Room B. They're currently in the middle of a discussion with one of our dealers. I'll take you…"

"No need. Meeting Room B? This place isn't a maze or anything, is it?"

"Erm—well, no, it's not."

"Then we don't need to trouble you. Oh—three more members of our group should be on their way here. A human, an elf, and a dwarf—all women. Let them know where we are."

"Understood."

I acknowledged the bowing clerk with a wave, then headed to the showroom with Dr. Shouko and Kugi.

"Oh—our newest model's here too."

"Hm? Let's see… Whoa. It's freaking huge."

Dr. Shouko was pointing at a medical pod on display in the showroom. It was a full-fledged model, not a basic pod. The medical pods on *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* weren't much bigger than beds; the model before us was roughly three times larger. *Hmm…horizontally, it's about the same size. It's mainly bigger vertically. It wouldn't take up much more space, so we might actually be able to fit one of these.*

"Its length and width are about the same as those of the pods you have now, so although it would block visibility, installing it wouldn't be too hard," Dr. Shouko noted. "I highly recommend this model… Just saying."

"It's expensive, though, right?"

"Well, yeah." Dr. Shouko glanced away.

Well, if she thinks we need this model, I don't mind buying it. Even if it's a bit costly, it can't be that *expensive. Actually, medical equipment's supposed to be ridiculously pricy, isn't it? Or maybe not. The prices of things in this universe don't necessarily follow the same logic as on Earth. For example, precision equipment is pretty cheap, thanks to replicators.*

"We can discuss it more later. We've got a hefty budget to work with, after all. And if anything catches your attention, Kugi, feel free to speak up."

"Yes, my lord."

I never get tired of how cute Kugi is when she looks up at me with her tails wagging. I'd really like to attach a cute tail to Dr. Shouko too, to see—well, I guess that'd be a bit… Actually, I can totally picture it. Not bad. I'm kind of into it. And I'm really curious as to how she'd present herself while wearing a tail and animal ears.

Hmm? I was supposed to be on guard right then against a potential enemy ambush? Well, we were in the middle of the city, and tons of people were there; I doubted we were in any danger at the moment. And since Elma had a good head on her shoulders, I was sure that she was on her way via a slightly longer, but safer, route. Thinking about the future was sure a headache, though. How was I supposed to resolve this issue…? *Ugh.*

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As we approached the meeting room, the door suddenly opened by itself, and Mei stepped out to greet us.

"Hey there, Mei. How's it going?"

"Greetings, Master. We've informed them of our requirements and are currently midway through selecting candidates who meet our needs."

"I see. Let's deal with the tasks here first, then."

"Yes, Master."

If that hostility or murderousness was only targeted at me personally, there would be plenty of ways to deal with it, so I decided not to spend too long dwelling on it for now. What? There are plenty of solutions to problems. They say money can't buy happiness, but it can definitely resolve most of the issues in your life.

"Thank you for choosing us," a representative of the shop said. "I'm Terada of the Okamoto Trading Group."

"Nice to meet you. But it's these two who chose you."

I hadn't been at all involved in selecting which company we'd deal with, so being thanked for choosing Okamoto Trading Group felt weird. I accepted Mr. Terada's holographic business card using my terminal, then sat down on Mei's invitation.

Terada of Okamoto Trading Group, eh? The names on Arein Tertius are awfully similar to Japanese names. Dr. Shouko's name

sounds pretty Japanese too; so does "Inagawa Technologies." Is there a reason for that?

"The main specialists who will actually use these facilities are Wiska over there and Dr. Shouko over here, so focus on meeting whatever requirements they have. As for budget, I'll leave all that to Mei's discretion."

"Understood," Terada said.

"Yes, Master."

We had quite a bit of money saved up. Between what we'd earned hunting pirates during our travels, and through retainer fees from jobs like the military mission earlier, we were currently sitting on about fifty million Ener. The income from the trading Mimi conducted also amounted to a not inconsiderable sum, and then there were the earnings generated by selling loot the twins salvaged.

Uh…well, sure, what we do isn't really all that different from the work of highwaymen. Our targets just happen to be pirates rather than ordinary people. But that distinction is important! Since we target pirates, our actions are justified! Yeah—they absolutely are!

"Having one of Shun Dimetric's chamber scanners would definitely be useful."

"We're looking for a replicator that can handle larger objects…"

"I believe you'll find this product to your liking."

"Let's modify the room over here like this."

"Oh, you've also got one of our—that is, Inagawa Technology's—latest medical pods, right?"

The researcher, engineer, company employee, and Maidroid had gathered around the hologram of the *Black Lotus,* as well as holo-displays of various catalog-like things, to discuss upgrades. Kugi and I watched as we enjoyed tea poured by the dealer's companion gynoid, which may or may not have been a Maidroid manufactured by Orient Industries.

"This tea is quite good, my lord," Kugi noted.

"The tea *and* treats are good."

I wasn't sure how Mei and Wiska had described us after contacting this place, but Okamoto Trading Group must've seen us as VIP customers. I couldn't tell whether this tea was brewed from real, natural tea leaves, but they were very aromatic and definitely not low quality. Meanwhile, the confections they'd served us resembled rakugan; it was my first time seeing such refreshments since coming to this universe. I hadn't been very fond of them before, but they paired pretty well with warm tea.

"Do you think Elma's group is in any danger?"

"They should be here soon."

Just as Kugi asked me that question, a message from Elma had arrived on my terminal. Once Mimi and the others got here, it'd be time to get to work. *Hopefully these people exist and aren't too difficult to hire…*

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I greeted Elma and her group, who'd just arrived at the business we were visiting, Okamoto Trading Group. "It's good to see that you're safe."

"Of course I am; this is an extremely safe colony," Elma replied, sarcasm lacing her voice. "Only someone like you would run into trouble here."

"Elma, please don't…" She'd stabbed me right where it hurt.

"Are you all right, Master Hiro?"

In contrast, Mimi here was worrying over me. She was an angel—an absolute angel. But I could tell that Elma was concerned about me too, even if her words didn't show it. As for Tina… After a hasty greeting, she charged over to join the group discussing the upgrades.

"I'm fine… I wasn't actually attacked. Hopefully I'm just being paranoid," I said, glancing at Kugi. She looked down and shook her head. *Yeah. Figures.* I wasn't being a worrywart; someone actually was targeting me.

"So what's the plan?" Elma asked. "I'm in favor of just running away with our tail between our legs."

"Well, yeah—but shouldn't we identify whoever's targeting us first?" I replied.

It would be hard to make appropriate decisions without having accurately determined the level of threat we faced. If I'd only sensed some local hoodlums who had it out for me, then this was just a farce. I doubted common space pirates or hoodlums could muster that murderous energy, though.

"Have you *got* a plan?" Elma followed up. "This could be getting pretty dangerous."

"I do. We can simply hire others to handle the dangerous aspects for us," I answered, showing her and Mimi my terminal. Its screen displayed information on security companies operating on Arein Tertius.

"Oh, I see," Elma said. "That could work, but it won't be cheap… Can we afford it?"

"The cost shouldn't be a problem. We can always make more money if we need to."

This was a high-tech system, so some of the cutting-edge products here were really expensive. That meant there were lots of pirates nearby targeting those expensive products. On top of that, the people who traveled around this system tended to be relatively well-off, resulting in a lucrative business for kidnappers. All that made this the perfect hunting ground for someone like me.

"In that case, I'll get to work finding a company that suits our needs!" Mimi volunteered, "What requirements do you have in mind?"

"It's fine if they're expensive, but ideally we'll want a company that can launch a counteroffensive against whoever's targeting us. We want someone willing to operate on the assumption that we are indeed being targeted, and able to either hunt the culprits down or lay a wide net to catch them."

"Understood. I'll start searching," Mimi said, taking her tablet out of her personal pouch. It would be best to leave this task to her, and having Mei double-check the information she gathered would be the icing on the cake.

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Leaving Mimi and Elma to find security companies and choose one, Kugi and I rejoined the group discussing the *Black Lotus*'s structural upgrades.

"Looks like you guys are almost done," I noted.

"Yeah," Tina said. "There wasn't much for me to add either."

I joined her in reviewing how the *Black Lotus* would look after the improvements. They would change roughly half of the previously mostly empty residential section into a research area. That would still leave a number of empty rooms that could house additional people. There would no longer be space to house the staff of four media companies simultaneously, though; there'd be enough room for one, or perhaps two if we crammed them in.

"A dedicated subgenerator for the research facilities…? Was the output of the *Black Lotus*'s generator insufficient?" I asked, furrowing my brow as I noticed the small new generator situated in the research area. Naturally, I was concerned for safety reasons. Even if that was just a small subgenerator, it was still a generator; if it ate a direct hit during combat, it could explode, taking the *Black Lotus* down with it. Ships weren't built to handle internal explosions.

"Your concerns are reasonable, Master," Mei acknowledged. "However, research facilities require an independent energy source. To minimize risk, the generator will be placed in the most heavily

plated area possible, and where it seems least likely to be struck by enemy fire."

"The subgenerator isn't solving an issue with output capacity… It's a safeguard against worst-case scenarios," Dr. Shouko explained. "Without it, for example, something could go wrong and consume a lot of energy, short-circuiting the generator instantly."

"If that happened to our main generator during FTL travel, our shields might suddenly go down," Wiska added. "That'd turn us into a wreck. Or our hyperdrive might shut down during interstellar travel and send us to who-knows-where… And, well, a subgenerator's generally not that risky, so…"

"I've heard enough. You have my permission." I wasn't fond of the idea of adding a critical weakness to the *Black Lotus*, but if it was implemented to prevent potentially catastrophic accidents, that changed things. "It's not like I can restrict you to only researching things that couldn't result in those kind of accidents."

"It's nice having such an understanding captain," Dr. Shouko said.

It wasn't like I had any idea what kind of research she planned to conduct, but no doubt it would be difficult to do properly under strict energy limitations. Thus, a subgenerator would be necessary if I wanted her to be able to research to her heart's content. It was a low price to pay for a skilled ship's doctor like Dr. Shouko. *Wait… That really* isn't *that low a price. W-well…I'm sure her research will benefit us one way or another at some point, so it'll probably be helpful in the end! Yeah. Besides, none of this will matter as long as we don't let enemy fire hit the* Black Lotus*. Things will work out. We'll* make *them work out.*

"I know it's best just to leave matters like these to the professionals, while the boss takes responsibility, but…" I glanced over at Tina.

"Hmm?" Tina was usually all over the place; still, when it came to things that mattered, she knew when to call it quits.

"You're in charge of our technical division, Tina, so make sure to keep everyone in check and keep them from doing anything too crazy."

"Hon, you being serious?" she immediately protested.

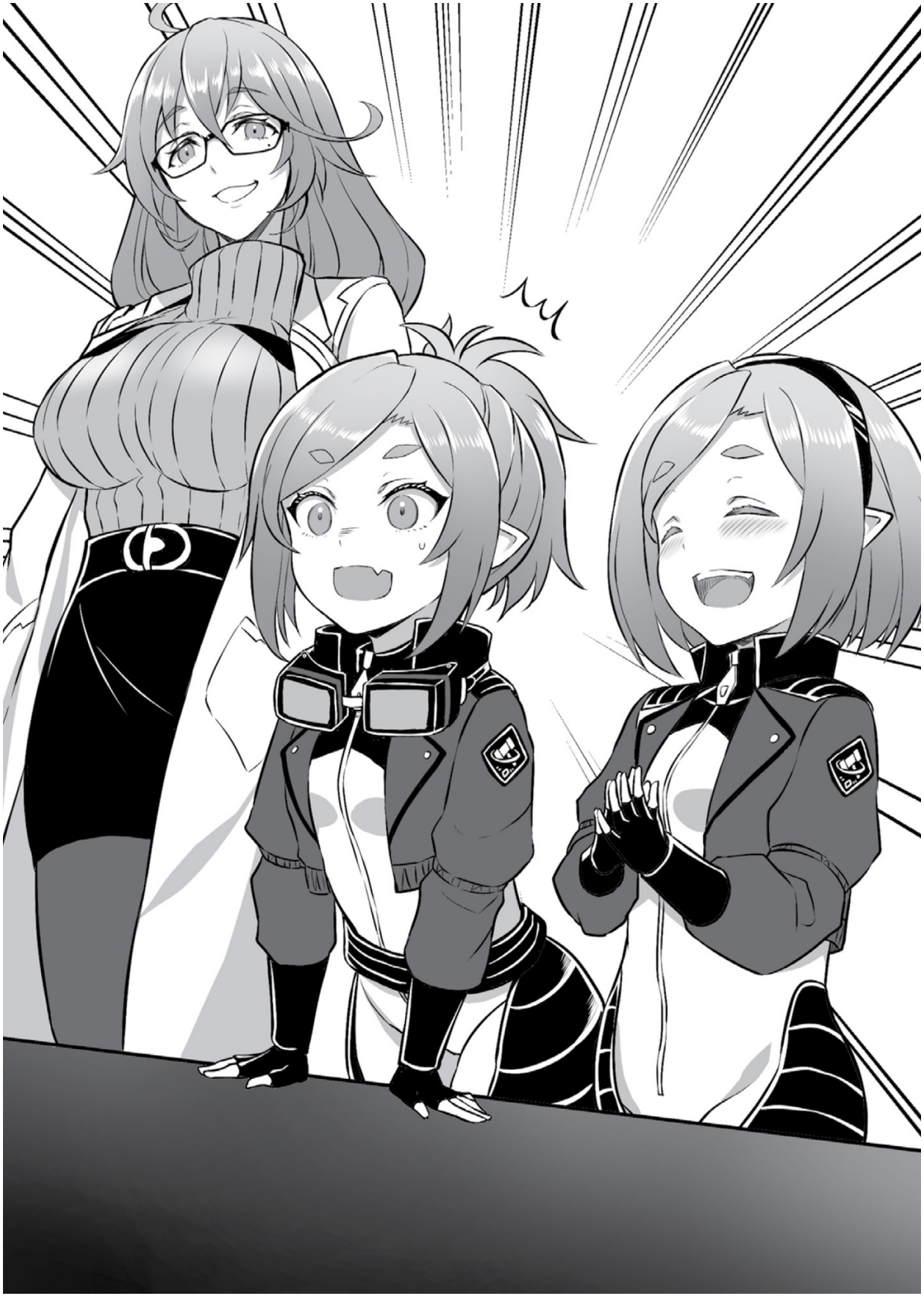
I cut her off ruthlessly. "And, as head of the technical division, your reward will be first dibs on any good booze we get."

"No takesies-backsies! If I find out you fibbed to me, I'm gonna pull it off."

"I don't think I want to know what you're referring to, so I won't ask."

Whether she meant one of my limbs, my hair, or the thing that symbolized my masculinity, none of the possibilities brought comfort. Given Tina's strength, she could actually do it. But, before pulling whatever it was off, she'd probably end up crushing me.

"That takes care of matters related to the generator and personnel management," I declared. "Still…I really don't get this. Does the design have *two* research rooms?"



"We split nanotech and biotech research into a different room from other research. They'll both need clean rooms, but preventing leaks will be especially important while researching nanotech and biotech."

"Leaks? I think I just heard something scary, but I'm going to pretend I didn't. I won't ask you to restrict yourselves to research that benefits us, but be reasonable, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"I will do my best."

Dr. Shouko and Wiska had answered with bright but untrustworthy smiles. Nevertheless, I wasn't investing in these facilities because I expected certain results, so it was better that I just not continue with the topic.

"We'll discuss the future prospects thoroughly later…" I said. "I see the medical bay will get a lot bigger too."

"Yes, Master," Mei confirmed. "Since a doctor with specialized skills is joining us, I took the opportunity to expand the facilities."

"No matter what happens to any of you, as long as you come back alive, I guarantee I'll restore you to health," Dr. Shouko vowed. "Of course, it'll naturally be preferable if my skills never become necessary in that way."

"That's reassuring to hear." Given the technology available in this universe, Dr. Shouko could probably live up to that promise. She actually might not be exaggerating her capabilities. "So are these upgrades within our budget?"

"Yes," Mei replied. "Barely, but yes."

"Seriously…?"

I'd told them that they could spend up to thirty million Ener. Given that we were a major customer willing to splurge to that degree, it was no wonder that this dealer had pulled out all the stops. Offering us the best tea and refreshments they could was only

natural. I still had no idea whether these improvements would be relatively expensive or cheap, since the prices of things in this universe were so different. *I vaguely recall that a single electron microscope cost seven or eight figures in yen back home. Wait—was it* nine *figures? I really don't remember anymore.*

Hopefully hiring the security company wouldn't cost too much. *Either way, I doubt they'll set us back more than ten million Ener. Not that I have any idea what the going rate is.*

"Well, as long as they're within our budget, I guess they're fine. We could shoot for the moon, after all."

"Yeah… Actually, if our budget was unlimited, we could aim a bit higher than what we're settling for."

"Spare me. Even for mercenaries, this is quite an expenditure."

"Now that I've gotten a proper look at the actual cost, I'm getting cold feet…" Wiska said, her smile fading.

Good. It's best that you acknowledge the reality of your own actions. A portion of the money we'd spend today had resulted from the blood, sweat, and tears Wiska and Tina put into their work, though, so they didn't need to feel bad about it. *Also, Mr. Terada, that sudden panic was extremely obvious. Don't worry; we don't to plan to renege on this deal.*

***

We left the upgrade paperwork and docking arrangements to Mr. Terada, heading back to the hotel. The plan was to arrange for a security company's protection, then take it easy for the rest of the day.

"Once we've arranged a security detail, we can go shopping and exploring," I said.

"Good idea!" said Mimi. "We were here once before, but there are still lots of spots we've yet to visit that I think would be worth looking at."

"I definitely want to take Tina and the others *there* too."

"*There?*" asked Wiska.

"It's a fun place."

"I don't think I trust that look on your face, hon…"

Rude. I just wanted to broaden your horizons by taking you on a field trip to the cultured meat plant…

"Ah—I remember. You mean that spot, right? The cultured meat factory? Not interested."

"Tch! I already told you about it?" *What a mistake. Come to think of it, I do vaguely recall mentioning our experience visiting Arein Tertius's cultured meat plant. I've told Tina and the others quite a bit about our adventures prior to meeting them. It made for good pillow talk.*

"Cultured meat plant?" Kugi asked, interested.

Oh, yeah—I haven't told Kugi that story yet. "It's a factory that makes meat."

"A factory that makes *meat*?! I can't wait!" she exclaimed in excited anticipation.

"I've been there once already, though, so I guess I'll pass on revisiting it."

"I see…" Kugi replied. She was clearly deflated; her ears and tails drooped.

Hey, that's not fair… Though I doubt she's doing that on purpose. "Well, maybe if the opportunity presents itself. …No, let's make time for a visit."

When Kugi had recognized that I was about to make a noncommittal promise, she'd seemed even more disappointed, so in the end I'd firmly agreed to go with her.

Tina was smirking in amusement beside me, so I grabbed her arm. "Of course, Tina and Wiska will come with us too. They have yet to experience the factory in person, after all."

"Huh? Wait—"

"Me too?!"

I'd roped Wiska in as collateral damage, ignoring her astonished expression. *If I'm going to suffer, everyone's going to suffer with me!* Having that pair experience the factory was my goal in the first place.

"I'll pass," said Dr. Shouko. "I probably know more about that process than you do, Hiro."

"Makes sense."

I wasn't sure whether Inagawa Technologies had connections to those meat factories or not, but Dr. Shouko had probably researched how those facilities functioned thoroughly during the investigation and analysis of the white monsters that had shown up last time we were here. It stood to reason that she knew more about the topic than I did.

"Let's get back to our rooms for now," I suggested.

"Yeah, let's do that," Elma responded lackadaisically, clearly done with this topic. I could only pray that Kugi would forget that the conversation had happened.

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Sticking to busy streets as best we could, we returned to our hotel suite. After changing into more comfortable clothes, we regrouped in the gigantic living room, which contained a soft sofa and a table and chairs that looked antique. The latter seemed wooden, though according to Mei, the material wasn't real wood—just something that imitated its look and feel. Why someone would have put such cutting-edge technology to use to create imitation wood was beyond me.

"So, uh…someone's targeting you or something, right?" Elma asked. She'd changed into a tank top and shorts and was currently opening a can of uncarbonated beer.

"Yeah. Hopefully it's just my imagination, but unfortunately, it probably isn't."

"I felt that hostility as well, so it's not just your imagination. However…" Kugi hesitated.

I pressed her to continue. "However…?"

"Rather than targeting us as a group, I believe the hostility was directed at you specifically, my lord."

"Oh. That might be true. It did feel directed at me personally." That said, I still had no idea why that might be the case. Of course, considering my actions up until now, I was sure that space pirates nursed quite a grudge against me. Still, I hadn't felt like I was being targeted by a space pirate. I couldn't quite articulate this, but whoever was targeting me felt way more dangerous than that. "Maybe some group plans to kill me to gain notoriety?"

"I doubt that's the case," replied Elma. "At the very least, I doubt any mercenaries, nobles, or official organizations would try pulling something like that. I could see them challenging you and openly attempting to take you down, but they wouldn't try to assassinate you in the middle of a city."

"I see. So it has to be some kind of space pirate, or someone who wants to kill me despite the hit their reputation could receive as a result. Neither option makes much sense, though…"

"Why not?" asked Tina.

"The source of the hostility directed that feeling at me the instant they found me. That level of obsession isn't normal."

That hostility had originated from outside the detection range of either Kugi or myself, which meant the enemy had prepared a method of monitoring us from a good distance away.

"We just reached this colony today, so they must've prepped for our arrival in advance. I doubt they could've gotten everything into place in the short time that's passed since we got to Arein Tertius. However, we only decided to come here after we visited that

outermost region, and we traveled using a gateway. How could they have known we were coming here, and prepared in advance, unless they'd been following us since we left the outermost region?"

"Are you suggesting there's a spy among us…?" Elma said, her brow furrowing.

I shook my head. "No. The chance of that is basically zero." I wasn't interested in even entertaining the idea. Besides, no one in our group had any way to make outside contact while evading Mei's detection, since she was essentially omniscient aboard the *Black Lotus.* "What I'm trying to say is that whoever's targeting me prepared for that in advance here on Arein Tertius."

"I see…I see," Mimi said uncertainly.

It wasn't clear whether she understood my implication, and the other girls seemed puzzled too.

"So who's targeting us, then?" asked Dr. Shouko.

"That's the problem; I don't know. Whoever it is, though, they aren't your everyday pirate. I doubt we'll guess their identity through logical means; it's likely someone who'd fall entirely outside those."

Logically, the only people who might hold a grudge against me were other mercenaries, some nobles, or space pirates, but I didn't think it was one of those groups. It was probably a separate group or individual entirely.

"So you mean we've got no clue who's after you," Tina said.

"Pretty much, yeah. I just wanted to put into words that, whoever it is, they aren't a normal enemy."

I hoped that by assuming that we couldn't determine who was targeting me through logical means, we'd safeguard ourselves against unpredictable attacks. Beyond that, all I could do was pray that whoever it was wouldn't be insane enough to use plasma or reactive weapons in broad daylight without regard for potential collateral damage.

"Keep that in mind while you're deciding on a security company," I added.

"Got it. We've narrowed the choices down to two companies." Mimi used her tablet to project the information on the table's built-in holo-display into the center of the living room. "Iga Security and Koga Services."

"I feel like I might let out a strange shriek and wet myself," I quipped.

Both companies were definitely run by ninja. I hadn't even looked at the screen yet, but I could tell just from their names. They were ninja for sure. I'd bet a case of uncarbonated cola on that. I was also convinced the two companies must hate each other.

"Iga Security mainly services biotech companies, while Koga Services works mostly with cybernetic businesses. Both seem to offer high-quality services, but with prices that correspond with that quality."

"Inagawa Technologies had a contract with Iga Security," Dr. Shouko interjected. "I might know a few people who work there. While I was working for Inagawa, it was pretty normal to have a guard from Iga accompanying me."

"Let's contact Iga Security, then," I said.

If it wasn't clear which company was better, then it would be best simply to choose whichever we had an existing connection with, however slight. Since Dr. Shouko had used their services for some time, she might be familiar with how they operated.

"Looking at the services they offer, though, are they *really* just a security company…?"

Beyond standard bodyguarding, Iga Security also provided violent-sounding services like counterespionage and property recovery. They didn't offer anything like outright assassination, though.

"I'm not that familiar with how the industry works, so all I can say is that that's just how things are," Dr. Shouko remarked.

"I see…" I replied. "Well, let's contact them for now."

"Sure. As they say, giving birth is actually easier than freaking out about it."

I wasn't sure whether that phrase really suited the situation, but it was true that we had no reason to delay. There was no point fretting over which company to choose, so it would indeed be best just to go ahead and contact one.

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We reached out to Iga Security, and they immediately told us that they'd send a representative to our hotel.

"I didn't expect them to send someone in person," I noted. "I thought holo-transmissions and messages would suffice."

"Low-tech communication is still the most secure," Dr. Shouko replied. "Transmissions can be intercepted, and attackers can sometimes directly hack into communication devices."

"Now that you mention it, back when we were trying to send Chris's holo-message to Count Dalenwald, Elma delivered the recording directly to the courier." *So she did that out of security concerns. I see.* Sending the message digitally might've resulted in it being intercepted or modified.

"Now that's an old story…" Elma mused. "You were a lot cuter back then."

"I remember!" Mimi chimed in.

Elma smirked, and a brilliant smile spread on Mimi's face. Why were the impressions they gave me so different, even though they were both smiling? What a mystery.

"Oh? Oh? Go on, go on!" Tina said.

"I want to know too!" Wiska interjected.

"I-I'd also like to know…"

Tina's and Wiska's reactions didn't surprise me, but I hadn't expected Kugi to join in. Dr. Shouko was smirking too. *Nobody in this room is on my side… Maybe Mei? No, Mei won't stop them. This isn't enough to make her act. And though I can't read her expression, I can still tell she's curious herself.* "Okay, stop! We're done with that topic! We can talk about it later on! The rep from Iga Security will be here soon."

"Yes, Master. I will ask Miss Elma and Miss Mimi for the details later."

"…Knock yourself out."

I probably should've left out the "talk about it later on" part. Even if the rest of the crew forgot, Mei was sure to remember and bring it up again. *Oh well. No point crying over spilled milk. I just have to accept this and move on. I overreacted a bit out of concern, but I didn't do anything to be embarrassed about.*

As I was lost in thought, we received a notification from the lobby informing us that guests had arrived. We had the lobby confirm whether the visitors were representatives of Iga Security, then granted them permission to enter our suite.

"So they sent *representatives*, not a representative."

"Hm? Do they operate in pairs in case something happens?" Dr. Shouko asked.

"Maybe one is responsible for managerial stuff, while the other is the actual bodyguard?" Mimi suggested.

"I think it's probably both," Elma responded.

As Elma, Mimi, and Dr. Shouko chatted animatedly, Tina and Wiska moved away to sit quietly in a corner. Kugi silently stood next to them. *The twins usually don't weigh in when it comes to matters that could involve violence, and when we interact with outsiders, Kugi usually keeps to herself too.*

The twins probably just wanted to quietly observe, but Kugi had likely moved into the background so that she could actively use telepathy to probe the outsiders' intentions. I'd begun to think that she might actually be our group's most dangerous member.

Our eyes met. Kugi wagged her tails, responding to my glance with a brilliant smile. It was as if she was saying*, "Leave it to me, my lord! If these outsiders have any ill intentions, I will find out!"*

How dependable.

Mei approached the room's door and opened it. "Welcome. Please come in."

"Thank you. Pardon our intrusion."

"…Thank you."

Two individuals entered. One was a thin man of average height wearing a business suit. The other man, who was large, wore a business suit as well. By large, I mean *large*. His arms, calves, and thighs were so muscular that his suit was practically bursting at the seams.

That suit doesn't look like it fits. His buttons could burst at any moment. "I'm Captain Hiro, a mercenary."

"I am Ota of Iga Security. This is Killam."

"…"

The thin man had politely introduced himself before introducing the macho-looking individual next to him. His burly companion possessed another unique characteristic: facelessness. *Well, it's not that he doesn't* have *a face. It's just that his face is featureless. It's like I'm looking at a helmet.*

Noticing my gaze, Ota explained, "Killam's had all his body parts replaced with artificial organs."

"I see. He does appear quite strong."

"…I don't know about that," Killam said, seemingly looking toward Mei. But since his face was pure black and completely

featureless, it actually wasn't possible to tell where he was looking. Perhaps what appeared to be his face was just a mask, and beneath it was some mechanical lens.

"Killam," Ota said in a warning tone.

Killam's body twitched. Eventually he responded, "I can't beat this man, nor that Maidroid."

That twitch was probably him shrugging his shoulders. "In an actual fight, that might be true, but that's not why we'd be hiring you."

That statement kicked things off, and I explained what I wanted from them.

"To summarize things, there's a chance that someone is currently targeting us—or, more specifically, me. We plan to stay in this colony for a while as we have our ship renovated, so while we're here, I'd like you to serve as our bodyguards."

"A simple-enough bodyguard assignment."

"Yeah. Something weird's going on, though. We only arrived here today."

"Oh…?" Ota's expression shifted to a suspicious look.

Yeah, of course. Requesting a security company's services the same day you get to a colony is definitely unusual. "Uh-huh. I'm sure you have doubts about whether I'm truly being targeted, but I'd like you to operate under the assumption that there's a good chance someone is indeed after me."

I didn't explain exactly why I believed I was being targeted, since I had no intention of sharing details about Kugi's or my own psionic powers. I was a well-known platinum-ranker, so it shouldn't seem strange if I had my own sources of information; hopefully Ota and Killam would arrive at that convenient assumption.

"Do you know who might be after you?"

"If I knew who it was, I'd deal with them myself. I really have no clue, though. Well, I know some individuals who might hold a grudge against me, but we came here by gateway from an outermost region. I doubt any of the people I'm thinking of have influence that would stretch this far. That's why I'm stumped."

Ota paused, then asked with a grave expression, "How strong is the party targeting you?"

How strong, eh? How strong… "I have no proof, but I assume they're professionals who I can't afford to pull punches against. If they end up being local punks or a local syndicate, though, you can laugh at me and call me a paranoid scaredy-cat."

The person or persons after me had been able to find me immediately and quickly prepare a remote surveillance method, so it was natural to assume that they were real professionals.

"As for how to protect me, I'll leave that to you guys, since you're the professionals," I continued. "Rather than just having you protect me, though, I'd like to somehow lure the enemy into the open so that we can counterstrike against them—assuming you're willing to accept my request."

"…That won't be cheap."

"I've got money. As long as you keep them from attacking us directly—by which I mean while we're still in the colony—I'll be satisfied."

It would be enough for me if the enemy gave up on attacking us in the flesh. If we could force them to fight our ships in space instead, we'd beat them.

***

"That's probably what he's thinking, at least."

"His reaction wasn't unwarranted, given our goal."

That was true. I didn't want to take the fight to space.

"What should we do?"

"Iga Security… They aren't easy to deal with. But if I recall correctly, they have a competitor."

"Koga Services. Maybe get them to fight each other?"

"His group isn't the only one with money. Let's wait for an opportunity."

If our target had fled to somewhere near the capital, it would've been really annoying, but there was no way for him to know that. However, he'd decided to remain here, which was convenient; apparently my luck wasn't so bad after all.

"Booooss, why not just try to make contact nooormally?"

"This involves *her*, so that's not a gamble I'm willing to take. And I don't want them to flee—that'd be the worst-case scenario. Did you finish investigating his background?"

"I couldn't find a thiiing. He first showed up in the Tarmein System, but not even the mercenary guild knows his origins or who his backers are."

"Are you asking me to believe he just happened to show up right in Tarmein and coincidentally ran into her, then brought her aboard his ship, rose from bronze to platinum rank within a few months, and gained the emperor's favor? Something about him is definitely fishy."

"Yeaaah, but I reaaally can't find anything! The Empire's intelligence bureau seems to be investigating him too, and I don't wanna screw uuuuup and get caaaught by them."

There she went again—whining, whining, whining. Why was she always like this? "I'm sure you can handle it. Do your best."

"Waaah! You old witch…!"

"Oh—do you miss my fist?" *If rolling up my sleeve is enough to silence you, then you shouldn't have said anything to begin with.*

That man was awfully hard to read… I'd pegged him as the rash, overconfident type. *Well, whatever. I'll just proceed as usual. He won't escape.*

***

"All right, then… Fifty thousand Ener per day."

"Yes, let's go with that."

The daily cost of a team of twelve people performing bodyguard and recon duties, came to fifty thousand Ener, which worked out to roughly forty-two hundred Ener per person a day. *Is that cheap or expensive…? If I remember correctly, a Warrant Officer First Class in the Imperial Fleet earns a monthly salary of roughly four thousand Ener. Skilled engineers like Tina and Wiska were paid even less than that at Space Dwergr.*

That didn't mean that each of the twelve people working for me would receive forty-two hundred Ener per day, but I'd still pay the equivalent of a highly skilled professional's monthly pay for a day of their time, so their services definitely didn't seem cheap.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, don't worry about it. How long we need you will depend on how long the overhaul takes. I expect those to be finished in two weeks at most, so how about I hire you for fourteen days for now?"

"That's fine with us. If an extension is necessary, we can renegotiate."

"Okay, then. Fourteen days means seven hundred thousand Ener. I'll pay directly, so have your people send me an invoice."

"Yes, we'll do that… Platinum-rankers are quite wealthy."

"I do all right for myself. Prep your people as quickly as possible."

"Leave it to me."

Ota politely bowed again, which was followed by Killam bowing as well. *Now, I hope this'll effectively deter whoever's monitoring me.*

***

"A lot happened today."

"Yuppers," Tina said.

"Yep," echoed Wiska.

Ota and Killam had left, so we'd taken turns showering and bathing, and were currently relaxing on the living-room sofa. I'd finished showering quickly, while Tina and Wiska—who'd won at rock-paper-scissors—had been the first to bathe. This suite—which was more like a residence—had multiple showers, bathrooms, and toilets, which made it very convenient for large groups.

"Hey hon, when are we holding that welcoming party for the good doctor?"

"Hmm…I'm thinking that we'll have it in the *Black Lotus*'s cafeteria after its upgrades are finished."

"Oh…" Tina listlessly leaned against me.

I guess she's sad that she won't get to drink tonight.

Joining Tina, Wiska likewise leaned against me listlessly. *What're you two doing?*

"I feel refreshed!" declared Mimi.

"Yes, I feel much better as well," agreed Kugi.

It seemed that they had bathed together as well. Elma came behind them.

"Is Dr. Shouko the last person having a bath?"

"She said that she was going to take her time," Elma told me.

"Augh!"

Elma had picked Tina up easily, thrown her to one side, and then sat down next to me. Tina was small, but still quite heavy due to her bone and muscle density, yet Elma had flung her aside as if it were nothing.

"You can sit here, Mimi," Wiska offered.

"Are you sure?"

"We had him to ourselves before you got here."

Having given up her position of her own accord, Wiska headed toward Kugi and began gently brushing her tails with a brush she'd taken out from who-knew-where.

"Sorry, Wiska. How many times does this make?"

"I do this because I enjoy it," Wiska told Kugi as she fluffed her tails. *I see—Wiska is a fluff enthusiast. Maybe I should get a brush of my own. I want to try fluffing those poofy tails myself.*

"Have we got plans for tomorrow, Master Hiro?"

"Hmm…We can't fly the *Black Lotus*, but we can still use the *Krishna* and *Antlion*, so we could go do some light pirate hunting. We've spent quite a bit of money recently, so earning more on a quick trip around the neighborhood doesn't sound bad."

"That's quite a violent trip you're envisioning… Although it would suit us." Elma didn't seem against that prospect.

Mimi seemed excited by it. "A mercenary-style trip!"

"Hm? What's the hurry? Can't we just laze around in the hotel?" Tina asked.

"That sounds good too," Elma mused.

"It's important to rest when you have the chance," Wiska said.

Her comment made some sense, but Tina and that traitor Elma definitely just wanted to laze around and drink the day away.

"I'd like to visit that meat factory," Kugi said.

"Meat factory…? Um…given the circumstances…"

"Aw…" her ears drooped.

It was true that I didn't really want to loiter around the colony due to that mysterious enemy monitoring us. Even if that hadn't been the case, though, I really wouldn't have wanted to go back to that factory. After the first visit, I would probably have built up some resistance; still, it wasn't something I wanted to experience a second time.

"Aah…that was great. Baths are the best."

"Mgh!"

Dr. Shouko must've just finished bathing; she entered the living room wearing virtually nothing but her panties. She had also draped a towel around her shoulders, like a slovenly old man, but her entire top half was exposed, despite her panties. Her you-know-whats were very *boing boing*.

"Doctor…I think it would be a good idea to be slightly more mindful of your appearance," Wiska said.

Dr. Shouko shrugged. "Hm? What's the big deal? We all get along like sisters here, and it's not as if there's a point in covering up in front of you, Hiro."

Boing. Jiggle.

Excellent. Exquisite. Praiseworthy indeed—! As I mentally applauded Dr. Shouko's assets, Mimi got onto her knees, grabbed my head, and pulled it between her breasts, blocking my vision. *What on Earth…? Have I arrived in paradise? I'm going to live here from now on.*

"Ah, jeez. Your hair is only half-dried," Elma told Dr. Shouko. "You have nice long hair, so you should take better care of it. Wiska, come help me."

"On it."

"Hm? It's not a big deal—wait! Huh? You two are really strong! Ow!"

Elma and Wiska dragged Dr. Shouko away, and not long after, I was exiled from paradise.

Ah! God… What did I do to deserve this?



Looking down at her flat chest, Tina muttered, "In the end, breasts are all about size, huh…?"

That's not true! Boobs are boobs, no matter how small. I would've shouted, protesting *"All breasts are equal!"* But that would only have made me sound creepy, so I decided to stay silent. Broaching that topic was just asking for it.

"Sheesh…I'm not a child," Dr. Shouko complained.

"That just makes it worse. At least clothe yourself properly."

"Whaaat? I thought mercenaries lived rough, free lives."

"That may be the case for other mercenaries, but not us."

Before long, Elma and Wiska returned with Dr. Shouko. She now wore an understated negligee, her hair properly dried.

"Oh, you had sleepwear," I noted.

"That belongs to Mei," Elma said.

"The chest is a bit tight," Dr. Shouko complained, pulling on the negligee's bodice. *It is indeed clinging tightly to you. That sight is another gift from the gods.*

"Hon, let's go shop for clothes for Dr. Shouko tomorrow."

"Eh…? What a pain. I don't *need* new clothes."

"You absolutely need new clothes. You only have two sets of the same outfit."

Dr. Shouko didn't have much of a wardrobe, apparently. According to her, she could wash one outfit while bathing or showering. It would be clean by the time she finished, so she didn't need any more garments, since apparently she also slept naked.

"It's not really the right time to go shopping…" she said.

"You need new clothes."

"You definitely do."

"Do I?"

Everyone besides Dr. Shouko herself was adamant about the necessity of shopping for her.

It would probably be a good idea to inform Ota about our schedule for tomorrow, so that we could discuss his plans for guarding us. Shopping would definitely be a risk…but it could also be an opportunity to draw out the enemy. *Better be positive…*

***

"Hey."

"Good morning."

After finishing our morning routines the next day, we left our rooms and went down to the hotel lobby. There, Ota and other Iga Security employees awaited us. I'd sent them an action plan the previous night, and they'd immediately arranged for a team to accompany us this morning. *Very good.*

"Sorry for the short notice," I told them.

"This is our job."

Today, Ota was dressed in work clothes. Rather than the business suit he'd worn the day before, he had on an outfit that made it obvious that he was personal security—light combat armor and a helmet, to be specific.

That combat armor and helmet's designs look… How do I put it…? Awfully similar to the ones a ninja would wear. The helmet's mouth area even looks like a ninja's faceguard… These guys really are ninja, aren't they?

"Four guards will protect you directly," Ota told me. "Four more will stick close on standby in case something happens."

"What about the last four?"

"Their job will be to counterattack your assailant."

I see. Of the twelve total guards, eight are assigned to defense, while four are on offense. I have no clue whether that

distribution is appropriate, but it's best to leave things like this to the professionals.

"I must say," he added, "seeing your crew all lined up like this is…quite a sight."

"Please don't." *Ota, I know what you want to say. Mimi, Elma, Mei, Tina, Wiska, Kugi, and Dr. Shouko… They're a collection of young women who are all beautiful in their own way.*

"All I'll say is that you're a man worthy of respect."

"Am I just supposed to thank you now?"

Through everyone's support, I was actually managing. If not for them, I'd probably have collapsed from stress by now. It was likely thanks to Mei actively handling the situation that things were somehow working out. I really owed her.

I had no way of knowing for sure, since their helmets covered their faces, but it felt like Iga Security's employees were all staring at me in curiosity. Honestly, because of their presence, *everyone* in the hotel lounge was staring at me. My group would now total twelve people, including me, and the four Iga Security employees among us were dressed very uniquely. It was only natural that we stood out.

"Nothing good will come of staying here longer, so let's get going," I said.

"Very well," Ota replied. "We'll guard you from a short distance away."

His group led the way, leaving the lounge first. *They'll guard us from a short distance away, huh? Well, we'll have our guard up too. And since he'll have two groups of four watching over us, that'll be eight additional fighters. That will definitely make it harder for the enemy to move.*

"If this ends up being nothing more than your paranoia, it'll make for a funny story," Dr. Shouko teased.

"He hired all these guards because he believes something's going to happen," Elma said.

"Something probably will. Master Hiro's intuition is eerily accurate," Mimi affirmed.

The two who'd been with me longest seemed to have half given up already. They already assumed that someone really was after us.

"Why don't we just stay in our rooms, then?" Dr. Shouko suggested.

"We're not the types to fuss about clothes either, but Doc, you really need to fix your wardrobe," Tina said.

"If Tina says you need to fix your wardrobe, it means you *really* need to," Wiska added.

She and Tina were pulling the hunched-over Dr. Shouko along on either side. The scene was kind of cute, if you ignored the fact that dwarves were really strong, and that it wasn't likely that anyone could resist *two* dwarves dragging them someplace. Even physically enhanced nobles would struggle to break free.

"Hm? Where'd Kugi go?"

"I think she's already outside," Mimi told me.

I glanced toward where she was looking and saw Kugi outside the hotel entrance. Her ears were pricked up, and she seemed to be examining the surroundings. Mei was with her.

"Are they scouting the way for us…? Let's get moving too."

"Okay!"

I sent Tina and Wiska a look that meant *"Drag—I mean,* escort *—Dr. Shouko,"* and we left the hotel.

"Hmm…no unusual movements today?" I asked Kugi.

"None, my lord. I do detect individuals examining us, but that's nothing out of the ordinary."

"True enough." We stood out. A lot. Even if I looked relatively normal, the girls in my group definitely attracted attention—especially Kugi.

Here and there, you might see true beastfolk—for instance, bipedal tigers and lions. But "beastfolk" like Kugi, who resembled humans that happened to have animal ears and tails, were extremely rare. Those characteristics were probably unique to Verthalz's citizens. *Actually, maybe people like Kugi are only rare in the Grakkan Empire, and totally normal in other countries?*

"Since things have come to this, Hiro, let's just get it over with as quickly as possible," said Dr. Shouko. "If it's unavoidable, then the sooner we deal with it, the better."

"I doubt this'll end quickly."

Although Dr. Shouko seemed to have resigned herself to her fate, I was skeptical that things would go as she wanted. When I'd shopped with Mimi, Elma, and Chris last time, picking out a single outfit for me had taken them a while. Today even more people were with us, and we were going to a giant shopping center brimming with clothing stores. It was unlikely that Dr. Shouko would get her wish… But if I pointed that out bluntly, she might throw a tantrum, so I kept the thought to myself. After all, *that* store was located here too.

"We don't want to keep them waiting. Let's get a move on," I said.

"Okay! I'll lead the way," Mimi responded.

Tablet in hand, she began walking. Our formation consisted of Mimi up front, then me and Kugi, Elma, Dr. Shouko with Tina and Wiska clinging to her arms, and finally Mei in the rear.

"Our guards are staying at a distance that's not too far away, but not too close."

"Yeah."

The traffic made them difficult to see, but I sensed a nearby quartet watching us, and two more pairs of people farther away doing likewise. Those pairs had to move quite a bit to keep up with us whenever we crossed a street. It must've been challenging.

"Tough job."

"Yeah."

Despite how quickly those guards had to maneuver to keep pace, they managed to do so without causing a scene. *They really are ninja, aren't they?* I thought, following Mimi.

Chapter 4:
Bunny Girls: The Stuff of Dreams

"THIS'S OUR BUDGET. Do with it as you see fit."

"Yes, Master."

Once we'd reached the shopping center, I entered break mode. Handing our budget over to Mei, I ceded full responsibility to her. After all, this trip's purpose was to shop for clothes for Dr. Shouko, and those would naturally include lingerie. Accompanying the others would definitely be uncomfortable for me, so I didn't plan to.

"Don't wander around," Elma warned. "Hear me?"

"I'm not a kid. I'll be fine," I insisted.

"This is *you* we're talking about, hon…"

I had no way to refute that, unfortunately. Going by my track record, I wouldn't just run into trouble no matter what I did, a stream of issues would assault us from all sides. *What'd I do to deserve this?* I wondered, wallowing in self-pity.

"Let's see here…"

Although I'd employed a security company, simply staying on the defensive didn't suit me, since whoever was targeting me would still get the jump on me in the end. Whether in games or anything else, if your enemy got the initiative, you were in for a one-sided beating. Sometimes you needed to be passive; still, I wanted to turn the tables, whether by setting a trap or doing something else.

Looking ahead and left, I spoke to a seemingly empty space by a vending machine. "I want to reclaim the initiative somehow—any ideas? I'll act as bait if needed."

My question wasn't answered, but no, I hadn't gone crazy. Though no one appeared to be there, I could tell that someone was. They were probably using some optical camouflage to remain invisible.

The camouflaged person began to move, and I followed them with my eyes.

"Can you see me…?" they asked.

I shrugged. "No, I can't, but I know you're there." Although they weren't actually visible to me, I could detect their thought waves.

"This thermal optical camouflage can supposedly fool even a military combat bot's sensors…"

Vwoom. Someone dressed like a ninja—more specifically, a kunoichi—appeared out of thin air. *So she* was *using some kind of optical camouflage. Thermal camouflage… Does that name mean it can also hide your body heat? Mm…I must say, that skintight suit's nice.* Why "nice," you ask? You know why.

I'd never seen my own crew wear anything like that. Tina and Wiska's work jumpsuits were somewhat similar but not nearly as thin or skintight. Suits like this showed up all the time in sci-fi manga and anime, but I figured anime and manga weren't real in the end.

The formerly camouflaged kunoichi turned to me. "You are making it a little too obvious where you're looking…" Although she was facing me, I still couldn't see her features; they were covered by a full mask.

"I'm just appreciating your impressive gaze-guidance techniques."

She sighed and shrugged. "You didn't even pretend to look away, despite my warning…but I guess I shouldn't be surprised." Her voluminous chest jiggled.

Ah, yes, a feast for—no, I need to stay on guard. She might attack me. I'm a capable man, so I never avert my eyes from potential threats. Yes. Infallible logic.

"So…you're volunteering to act as bait? Have you broken the part of your brain responsible for self-preservation?"

"Wow…vicious. I'd say I place a lot of weight on self-preservation. But right now, our enemy is basically chipping away at our mental endurance. I'd like to reclaim the initiative if possible."

"Is that so? You're willing to endanger yourself if that breaks you out of the current situation? In that case, why did you employ us in the first place?"

"I've just been outreasoned by someone in a skintight erotic outfit."

"I'll sue you for sexual harassment."



"Anything but that."

As we conversed—harmoniously?—I got her to contact her boss, Ota. Together, we solidified a plan that used me as bait.

"That is a plan indeed," the kunoichi concluded. "But it's rather ham-fisted—I mean, ambitious."

"You've got quite a sharp tongue on you. I'm your valued customer right now, you know? I'm paying a pretty penny for your services."

"If a customer is polite, I am polite in turn, but I see no reason to be civil with customers who are not."

"Fair enough." *This kunoichi in the erotic skintight suit is pretty interesting. I wish I could see her face.*

"So," she continued, "You must figure out how to portray yourself as a vulnerable, idiotic mercenary."

"Don't worry about that. I ordered my incredibly capable Maidroid to prepare the things I'll need for that. As soon as you guys ready the trap, we can get started."

"Is that so? Our chief says that it should be ready by tomorrow."

"Let's go with that. I'll start pretending to be an idiotic mercenary right now, then."

The kunoichi shrugged, then vanished with a sound like static.

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"So, yeah—that's what happened."

"I see. Her skintight suit made quite the impact on you."

"Well, yes, but is that the point?!"

I was telling Dr. Shouko about my discussion with the camouflaged kunoichi. Dr. Shouko must've been exhausted from being treated like a dress-up doll; she was hunched over in a daze.

And for some reason, she'd missed the point of what I'd described, focusing on an odd detail instead.

"How come you're so tired, anyway? You can try outfits on using scan data and preview functions."

"Those aren't good enough for undergarments. Scans can be used to obtain measurements, but you can't tell from those whether the fit of something feels good. They made me try out so many different undergarments, I'm exhausted."

"I lack the courage to enter a lingerie shop, but I kind of wish I'd been there to see it."

Dr. Shouko smirked. "You'll see all the purchases at some point. Look forward to it."

Nice. I will *look forward to it.* "So the others are still shopping?"

"Yeah, Mimi was grinning ear to ear. I think she's taking the group to her favorite store."

"Her favorite store… I see."

She must've been taking them to that Lolita fashion shop we'd visited previously. It had all sorts of Lolita-style clothes, and I was sure *that* shop clerk would do an excellent job.

On my terminal, I sent Mei a message: *Elma and Tina might try to run away, but don't let them.*

As usual, she immediately responded, *Understood.*

"After you rest a bit, we should join them," I told Dr. Shouko, "I've been there before myself."

"You've been there too?"

"Yeah. I went with Mimi last time we were here in Arein. It ended up being her favorite store we visited."

"Hm…well, why not?"

It seemed that Dr. Shouko sensed that something was a little off but wasn't sure what. *That stands to reason. Only a telepath could deduce my intentions with so little information. So unless you suddenly awaken telepathic powers greater than Kugi's, there's nothing you can do.*

When I thought about it, Dr. Shouko was quite tall, and she had a voluptuous figure. Would Lolita fashion even suit her? *No, it definitely will. Fashion is a profound art. I'm sure the classical style Mimi wears occasionally would look great on her.*

"You're thinking something perverted."

"No, I'm not. Who do you think I am? Why do I get the sense that you think I'm a lecher?"

"You aren't?"

"Well… No, I am."

Dr. Shouko giggled. "You're so cute when you're honest."

Even if I'd wanted to refute her, I wouldn't have a very convincing defense. I had no choice but to simply accept her assessment. *Your chickens eventually come home to roost. What a heartless world.*

"So what exactly are we doing?" Dr. Shouko asked.

"We're going to perform some normal mercenary activities."

"I see…?" she responded, puzzled. She probably wasn't sure what "normal mercenary activities" meant.

"Y'know—stuff like drinking, acting violent, and purchasing people."

"Oh. That's what you meant. I thought that you can't hold your alcohol, though?"

"Yeah. That's why I'll only do the other two."

"You're going to pay *certain people*…?" Dr. Shouko asked in a tone that clearly implied, *"Even though you already have me?"*

I'd expected that reaction, which was why I'd prepped an explanation to resolve it in advance. "Don't worry. I don't intend to neglect you or the others."

"Hm…what're you planning?"

I smirked and showed Dr. Shouko my terminal screen. "Heh heh heh… You see…"

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"I'm about to blow."

"E-Elma, calm down…"

The next day, I brought Elma and Mimi to a public casino operating on Arein Tertius. Elma was to my right, while Mimi attended me on the left: I had a flower in each hand.

"H-hey, you're being a bit much!"

"C'mon, what's the big deal? Go with the flow."

The two practically clung to me, wearing…bunny suits, believe it or not! Whether due to material limitations or perhaps just the designer's proclivities, the outfits had a slightly cyberpunk style, but they were definitely bunny suits. Of course, both girls also wore bunny-ear headbands, and round white tails were attached to their suits' rears. *Perfect*.

"Nngh…M-Master Hiro…if you keep rubbing my belly like that…"

"Heh heh heh… If we need to, we can rent a room someplace and take a break. Bunny suits really are wonderful. The stuff of dreams."

Under the gazes of onlookers, I ran my hands all over Mimi's body. She gently tried to resist, but I continued without hesitation.

"You're enjoying this," Elma said.

"To be honest, I certainly am enjoying—ow, that really hurts!"

Elma had pinched my hand where it wrapped around her waist. It stung slightly, but she wasn't really trying to stop me. It would've hurt like hell if she pinched me for real—like I'd been pinched with pliers. *Oh man. Just imagining that calmed me down.*

"So there's a very good reason you're forcing us to walk around with you in these embarrassing outfits, right?"

"Hopefully. In the end, that'll come down to Iga Security."

The plan I'd devised with Iga Security was a classic decoy strategy. Joined by Mimi and Elma, I'd act as a lure to draw out the enemies targeting me. Once they revealed themselves, Iga Security was supposed to surround and overwhelm them.

"Until they take the bait, let's enjoy ourselves here in the casino."

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"B-Boss, calm down."

"I am calm."

"No, you aren't. You're definitely fuming."

Of course I was fuming. No grandmother could maintain their calm while watching someone play around with their granddaughter like a toy. I was enraged…but it was coolheaded rage. I'd have loved to cut that bastard's head off with my cutlass at that very moment, but not amid all these onlookers.

"Tch…from the looks of it, she really *is* in love with him. Damn it, Folto. You could at least have raised her properly."

Or had her poor taste in men come from me? No, he wasn't that bad. He'd just played around too much.

"What's the plaaan, boooss?"

"Refer to me as 'Captain.' Hm…what should we do…? For now, let's put aside the fact that she's in love with that guy. There's no

guarantee that he's being aboveboard with her. Either way, I need to test whether he's worthy of entrusting my granddaughter to."

"Huh?! He's a platinum-ranker, and he was awarded a gold star. He has tons of money and can fight toe-to-toe with biologically enhanced humans. What mooore could you ask fooor?"

"Shut up. There's no guarantee that any of that is true. He might just be a pathetic weakling. And Mimi could just appear to like him on the surface, while in reality a slave collar or something is forcing her to act that way."

I was fully aware that I was stretching a bit, but first impressions were important. I had to get the better of this guy at least once to satisfy my anger.

"Besides, I really don't like how his background is shrouded in mystery," I added. "Have you found anything?"

"However much I loook, there's nothing to fiiind."

She *was* excellent at her job. When it came to hacking and cracking, few could beat her—at least on an individual level. She couldn't take on an entire organization or AI.

Despite her abilities, though, no matter how much searching she did, she didn't come across any evidence of that man's existence prior to his arrival in the Tarmein System. It was as if he'd just magically appeared right in front of Mimi. She'd even accessed the star system army's database, but all she'd found was a log entry that said he was "spat out into this section of space alongside his ship in a hyperdrive accident." An obviously fake account.

He'd stayed on his ship for a while, then begun working as a mercenary after registering with their guild. He'd met his current crew member Elma, a silver-rank mercenary, that same day; then he'd run into Mimi and brought her aboard his ship. There was no way all that was coincidence.

"Can't we just call it quits already, Boss? Your granddaughter was on the verge of falling to the lowest of lows, but good luck led a

skilled mercenary to take her in. Starting out as a complete amateur, she eventually grew into a capable warship operator. Now she enjoys a rich and free mercenary lifestyle with the man she loves. She seems happy, so isn't that enough, Boss?"

"I told you to refer to me as Captain," I insisted. "I haven't accepted their relationship yet."

"Ahh, jeeeez…Why are you being so stuuubborn? If she's happy and wants to be with him, I doubt anything you saaay will change her miiind."

"Still, she's Boss's granddaughter."

"Truuue…"

"Shut up. It seems you both want a taste of my fist." I clenched it, and the pair immediately skittered away like spiders. *Ugh… They sure run fast*.

The first time I'd seen him with Mimi, I'd lost my cool, wanting to kill him on the spot. Regardless of his intentions, though, it was true that he'd saved her when she was on the brink of tragedy. That was, unfortunately, a fact.

Still, that didn't give him the right to dress my granddaughter in such an embarrassing outfit and play with her as he pleased. Maybe I'd recognize their relationship eventually, but only after I tested his mettle in a fight.

***

"Yay! Master Hiro, I won again!"

"Ha ha ha… You're great at this, Mimi. Way better than this elf who only knows how to lose."

"Grr!"

All smiles, Mimi pointed at her chips on the roulette table; they began glowing in rainbow hues as a fanfare played. Elma, on the

other hand, groaned in frustration as her own chips appeared to crumble away.

I'd sensed the hostility directed toward me by onlookers when I brought the two girls in bunny costumes into the casino Iga Security had recommended. Inside, I'd purchased a ton of chips, and now the three of us were having a blast.

"You're out of chips."

"Mgh…!"

Elma had gambled on the turnaround of the century by putting all her chips on red, only to end up with zero chips remaining. I still had a lot of chips on hand, of course—but if Elma wanted some, she needed to do a certain something.

"M-Master! Please give me more chips! Bun!"

"Pfft! Ow, ow! Okay! Sorry, I won't laugh!"

Her face flushed, Elma had begun punching me in the side. Since she'd fulfilled her obligation, though, I replenished her chips. As for what that obligation was, I'd told her, "If you want extra chips, you need to ask in a cute way." Cringe? You think I'm cringe? I don't care! It hurt, but it was totally worth it; I got to see Elma beg me while her face was as red as a tomato!

As for Mimi, her pile of chips simply continued to grow. She had insane luck when it came to gambling. "Lucky" didn't begin to describe her. Seriously.

"Safe… I'm going to play safe! It's got to be red this time!" Elma declared. "Hmm…I'll bet on a middle number next!" said Mimi. "I'll do a street bet on sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen!"

Once everyone had set their bets on the table, the dealer put in a ball and spun the roulette wheel. *Elma, there's about a fifty percent chance of the ball landing on red, but I still can't say that betting* all *the chips I just gave you on red was a safe strategy.*

"Red, red, red…!" With sweaty palms, Elma watched the ball. It gradually slowed, landing—not on sixteen red, but next to it on

seventeen black.

"Yay!"

"Nooooo!"

The chips Mimi had gambled again glowed in rainbow colors as she won twelve times the amount she'd put in. As for Elma, once more, nothing remained of the chips she'd gambled. She really was bad at this. *Honored guest, please don't prostrate yourself on the table. You're disturbing other guests.*

"If you want to continue…you know what to do," I told her.

"U-ugh…Maaaster… This poor bunny only knows how to lose… Can you please grant her more chips? Bun!" Elma practically sobbed as she clung to my arm.

I replenished her chips again. *Wait, you idiot. Why do a street bet now? If you're going to gamble, at least do it sensibly!*

As we enjoyed ourselves, a strikingly imposing older woman appeared in the seat across from us. However charitable you tried to be, she didn't come off as a law-abiding citizen. Her dress was similar to that of a mercenary or a buccaneer, and she wore a curved sword—likely a cutlass—and laser gun at her waist. She also had on a visor that looked like a wearable computer. She probably had more weapons hidden from view.



Since this woman was armed to the teeth, she had to be some sort of noble. Normal guests—non-nobles—weren't allowed into the casino with weapons. If you had any, they were confiscated at the entrance. That rule didn't apply to me either, though, since I was an honorary viscount.

The older woman and I stared at each other. For my part, I stared because I could feel the animosity she harbored toward me. *Wait…* I recognized this as the same hostility I'd felt before.

I tried to contact Iga Security through my terminal, typing: *Hey, the person targeting me just showed up. How did she get here? Where are you guys?* They didn't respond, however. Actually, it was more like I couldn't get through to them. Confused, I looked back at the older woman—the granny—and caught her smirk as she lowered her visor.

"You two! Get down!"

Experiencing a bad premonition, I rose from my chair and reached for the sword at my waist. That was when it happened. The room suddenly went dark—both the gaudy casino lighting and the light from the holographic roulette table had been extinguished.

Other guests began to scream, which was to be expected, since a blackout was suddenly taking place. There was confusion, fear, screams, and the sound of something being struck—no, the sound of someone *leaping*. In the darkness, hostile intentions hurtled straight at me.

In that moment, I held my breath, slowing time down. Even if I'd wanted to fight back, though, I couldn't see anything. My eyes were used to the light and hadn't yet adapted to the darkness.

That was why, instead, I focused and created a giant, invisible telekinetic hand. Sweeping it in the direction the granny was coming from, I ended up striking the roulette table, the dealer, and some other guests as well. Still, there was no way anyone could have identified me as the one using invisible psionic abilities in this pitch-dark room. I stepped from between Mimi and Elma, who'd tensed up

when I shouted, and activated a light on my terminal. The flow of time returned to normal.

"Mgh?! You…!"

People groaned in agony as a sudden force flung them head over heels through the air. The granny, however, skillfully spun in midair, recovering her balance. When she landed, she immediately fled deeper into the casino.

"Elma! Prioritize safety! I'm going to chase that granny!"

"Hiro?!"

I left the stunned Mimi and flustered Elma behind, chasing the old woman with a sword and my light source in my hands. I'd only brought the longer of my two swords, but I still had a laser gun and terminal with me. I also had my psionic abilities as a trump card. However skilled that granny was, there was no way I'd lose.

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I chased the granny through the casino's gaming area, bar area, kitchen, and finally out of the casino, entering one of Arein Tertius's back alleys. I turned off my terminal's light and put the device away, then resumed my pursuit.

She's leading me somewhere. That old lady has definitely gotten high-level physical augmentations, so she could easily run at full speed and leave me in the dust. But she's moderating her speed so I don't lose her. Following her any farther will be dangerous—should I just give up now?

The moment I stopped, she stopped too. "No need to panic. It's finally just the two of us." Her clear voice carried well.

Facing the grinning granny as she spread her arms to either side, I swapped the sword in my right hand to my left, then pulled my laser gun from its holster and aimed at her.

"How cowardly," she said. "Is that really necessary? The lady before you hasn't raised her weapons."

"Cowardice is a necessary attribute for mercenaries. What're you plotting?" I asked, my finger on the trigger. However she answered, I planned to shoot her.

"Who knows? How about using your brain a littl—whoa! You damn brat!"

I had no intention of listening to her ramble, nor did I want to let her buy time. The moment she shrugged in condescension, I'd shot my laser gun—its set output just short of lethal—directly at her, firing three times.

"Impatient little brat, aren't you? Acquire the composure to enjoy the art of conversation!"

"Rambling in front of an enemy is the mark of a third-rate fool."

That damn granny had dodged two shots by turning slightly and drawn her cutlass to knock the last one away. *Is she actually an imperial noble? Her movements definitely suggest physical augmentation.*

"A man must be composed! Only then can he attract women!"

"I don't need any help on that front!"

The granny's left hand drew her own laser gun, and she began firing at me as well. I deflected her shots with the sword in my left hand. *She has her laser gun on a nonlethal setting too. She* doesn't *want to kill me?*

"Tch…prepare to lose an arm!" She flung her laser gun at me.

"Mgh…"

I dodged, but then something fell right at my feet. Assuming that it was some explosive, I retreated backward. A moment later, the object detonated, and smoke obscured our surroundings. I fired through it, aiming toward where I'd seen the granny last. That seemed not to have any effect, though. *Is that an anti-laser smokescreen?*

"Hah!" The old lady's cutlass came swooping at me through the smoke, its speed astonishing.

"Tch!" I knocked the blade away with the sword in my left hand, completely exposing the old woman's torso. Then I pointed my laser gun at her. Before I could fire, though, her cutlass reversed course at lightning speed, nearly slicing off my right hand along with my laser gun and forcing me to abandon the attack.

"Take that—and that!" she cried.

"You…!"

Her swordplay was incredible. Mei was faster and stronger, but this granny used her sword in a much tricker way. Even though I held my breath and slowed down time, I was barely holding on. At this rate, I'd lose.

It was time to use my trump card. "Haaah!"

"Whoa! Hey, that's not fair!"

"Do you think I give a damn?!"

I'd used telekinesis to knock the granny away from me, then pinned her down with a gigantic telekinetic hand. If I blanketed the area with my overwhelming psionic powers, she had no way to fight back, regardless of how skilled she was. As I considered whether I should just crush the old lady here, or if it would be better simply to keep her subdued, a shadow appeared on the other side of the alley. I detected hostile intentions emanating from above the building to my left as well.

"There!"

"Mgh?!"

I couldn't see these people, but I detected their hostility and fired my laser gun at whoever was ambushing me from above. As the nonlethal laser beam struck them, they cried out in pain.

Right before the beam from the laser gun struck the unseen enemy, it had seemed to bend. *Are they using something similar to*

that kunoichi's thermal optical camouflage?



"Ahh!"

"Gah!"

As I shot my mysterious assailants with my laser gun, they dropped sloppily to the ground. For good measure, I kicked them in the side like soccer balls. I might've broken a rib or two.

Then I stepped on a mysterious assailant's back and placed my sword against their neck. I also adjusted my laser gun, switching it to a lethal setting, and pointed the weapon at the granny I was still telekinetically suppressing. *Checkmate.*

As I looked closer at the man at my feet, I realized that he wore what was obviously a ninja outfit. *A mechanical—no, a cyber ninja?* "Huh? A ninja? Are you an agent from Koga Services? Don't move. If you lift even a finger, I'll separate your head from your body."

"Aye…aye…" The cyber ninja stopped struggling.

As for the granny…she'd given up as well. "Looks like I've lost my edge too," she sulked. "I can't believe a brat still wet behind the ears beat me."

Beyond the granny, I noticed a group of people in familiar outfits rushing toward us from within the alley. *That's Iga Security,* I observed. *Putting aside this Koga Security cyber ninja, should I just kill this granny right now? I really don't want to be dealing with someone like her constantly targeting me.*

Before I could pull my laser gun's trigger, the granny stopped me. "Whoa there… Killing me is a bad idea. You'll definitely regret it—and also lose out."

I didn't mind her pre-empting me, but if she wanted to dissuade me, she needed to do better than that. "I'll think about sparing you if you can convince me that I ought to before I pull this trigger."

"I'm related to a crewmate of yours. I can prove that. And if you let me go, I'll make sure you don't regret it. I won't target you

or your people anymore either. I swear it."

I tried to look into the granny's eyes to ascertain her sincerity, but her visor hid them. I doubted that would've helped anyway—this monstrous granny was experienced and crafty. I likely wouldn't be able to read anything useful from her.

"Okay, I'll listen… But if I find out you're lying, be prepared to deal with me turning the tables."

"You mean you'll be the one chasing me? Sounds fun."

"What the hell…? Anyway…as of this moment, this is a full ceasefire, okay?"

"Yeah. You win."

Hearing her agree, I gently released the pressure I'd placed on her using telekinesis. However, I maintained the gigantic invisible hand. There was no guarantee that the granny wouldn't suddenly assault me again in a final struggle.

"You're a careful one."

"I'm not sure what you mean." *Does this granny have a way to detect psionic powers? Well, whatever.* I injected a syringe of first-aid nanomachines into the neck of the cyber ninja groaning at my feet. "First-aid nanomachines, because I shot and kicked you," I explained. "My treat."

"Y-you have my gratitude…" The cyber ninja had initially stiffened, unsure what I'd injected him with. As he gingerly began to get up, however, my explanation and the sensation of what was happening in his body must've convinced him that I was telling the truth.

At about the same time, guards from Iga Security rushed in from the alley. The featureless giant Killam led the group, tricked out in full security armor.

"It seems…you're all right."

Killam was the guy who'd met us the other day alongside Ota. He now wielded a nonlethal electric weapon that looked like an ARC gun. The reason it only *looked* like one was that it was way bigger than the ARC guns I was used to. *Would that weapon really be nonlethal?*

"What's the situation?" he asked me.

"This granny attacked me after that blackout in the casino. I chased and subdued her. During that process, these cyber ninja suddenly showed up and jumped me, so I subdued them too. The granny surrendered, and we declared a ceasefire, so I injected some first-aid nanomachines into this cyber ninja. Now he's recovering."

"I'd rather not have to say this, but since you're our client, could you please let *us* guard you…? We have a reputation to uphold."

"Sorry about that. I had no choice but to protect myself, though, since I got attacked in that casino you introduced me to."

I wasn't sure how the featureless man managed to sigh, but he definitely did so, shrugging his shoulders.

"This is a mark on both our reputations," the Koga ninja lamented.

"At least *you* guys made it in time," said the granny. "Not that you were any help, since you got taken down immediately."

"Mgh…"

Her scorching review left both Killam and the cyber ninja reeling.

"Stop bullying the poor security guards," I told her. "They were forced to accommodate our unpredictable actions. Let's talk instead about how we intend to resolve this."

"Hmph. Yeah. That'll definitely be more constructive. How about we call it quits for the day and settle things tomorrow? I'll head to the hotel you guys are staying at."

"Fine… Let's go with that. When will you arrive?"

"Not too early… I'll be there before noon. We can finish our discussion and go out for a meal afterward."

"That'll depend on how the conversation goes," I responded.

The granny shrugged. Things had seemingly calmed down, at least for the present.

***

"Please forgive me?"

After fighting the granny, I'd returned to the hotel. There, I was forced to sit in the seiza position while Elma and Mimi—who still wore the same bunny suits as earlier—lectured me.

"You're the captain of this crew. Rushing headfirst into danger of your own accord is irresponsible," Elma said.

"Master Hiro, I can't defend you this time," Mimi added.

They had a point. I'd had the option to simply fend off the granny's ambush and then remain in the casino to protect them.

"I have an excuse, though…" I protested. "That granny was obviously targeting me, and I thought that as long as I went after her, she'd refrain from touching you two. The guards from Iga Security were there too, so I figured you guys would be safe."

"Even if that's the case, hon, you went after her by yourself. What if you'd lost? Ya need to consider your own safety too," Tina chimed in.

"I admit that it was a bit reckless, but the original plan fell apart the second that granny appeared right in front of me. We were supposed to surround and ambush her before she got that close. Since that plan failed, I had to improvise. Still, like I said, I *was* reckless to just go after her on my own. I'm sorry."

I'd presented my side of things, but then accepted the criticism I deserved. Taking on the granny by myself wasn't praiseworthy. If I

hadn’t managed to subdue her there, the situation would’ve taken even longer to resolve.

“It’s good that you’re willing to admit when you’re at fault,” Wiska said. “But don’t put yourself in danger anymore, okay?”

“I can’t promise you that. I know I’m saying this in hindsight, but things worked out in the end, right? And I acted within what I saw as my own margins of safety.”

“This isn’t working. He needs to be punished.”

“Wiska?!”

Wiska had initially just admonished me gently, but suddenly she’d made a complete one-eighty. *Punished?! How? You’re scaring me!*

“Okay. Let’s do it,” Dr. Shouko said. “Don’t worry, Hiro, I’ll take good care of you and ensure there’s no lasting damage.”

“Wait, wait! What the heck is that syringe?! Mei, save me!”

“Do not worry, Master. If I determine that you are in danger of physical harm, I will immediately take action.”

You’re basically saying that, as they don’t try to physically harm me, you won’t do anything! Noooo!

“Kugi?!”

“Um…I’m sorry, my lord. The others insisted that I not stop them this time. Um…I’ll be gentle.”

“*You’re* going to participate?!”

I had no way to escape. *Fine, then! Bring it on, damn it!*

Chapter 5:
The Legendary Granny

THE NEXT DAY, I was really drained.

"Everyone at once was a bit too much, even for me…"

Glued to my side in bed, Dr. Shouko whispered into my ear, "Need some steroids?"

"Please, no… You guys are going to kill me."

Although I was incredibly fatigued, the girls seemed to be practically glowing, Dr. Shouko included. The "punishment" Wiska had proposed the previous night had been truly awful. *Well, I guess it wasn't* that *bad. It was basically just some intimate faux-professional wrestling… But even without Mei taking part, facing off against six people in a row wasn't easy. It was practically impossible. If Mei* had *joined in… Well, intelligent machines don't get tired or pass out, so there's no way a human could ever have won. Give me a break!*

"There really is deeper meaning to socializing naked," Dr. Shouko mused.

"People say that about communal bathing, not the chaotic madness that took place last night," I objected.

"Didn't you enjoy yourself?"

"It was amazing," I responded immediately.

Dr. Shouko smirked in response. It was a bit unexpected, but when it came to things like this, she'd turned out to be the most proactive person in our group.

"Well, I've never had a family before," she pointed out. "I probably got drunk on the feeling of another person's warmth."

Her smirk as she said this made me unable to determine whether she was joking or serious. At any rate, the event had served as a bonding moment for the crew, so—despite being unorthodox—it had been a good thing in the end. Not that I could say it was particularly *healthy* bonding…

"I'm glad to hear that you enjoyed yourself. I did too," I said.

"A win-win. However, it's about time we get out of bed." Dr. Shouko replied.

"Mm-hmm."

The other girls had already left and were likely done their morning baths. There was still some time before our meeting with that old lady, but it was about time to get ready and eat something.

"Hiro, carry me," Dr. Shouko pleaded, holding out her arms.

"Huh…? Fine."

I lifted her and carried her toward the bathroom. I was feeling peckish, but before I ate, I'd need to prepare for the day.

***

After getting ready, I had a light brunch, then relaxed in my room for a bit. When the appointed time arrived, we moved as a group to the hotel lounge.

"Looks like they just got here too," I noted.

"That's them?"

"Yeah. No mistaking it."

At the same time we entered the lounge, the granny from the previous evening entered along with a young man and a woman, both dressed in mercenary attire. Behind them trailed three Koga Services employees. They wore uniforms printed with the company name and seal, making them immediately identifiable.

Looking at the group, Mimi cocked her head in puzzlement. "Hmm? That woman… I feel like I've seen her before." She was

studying the granny I'd fought yesterday evening.

Oh, you're kidding me. That's what this is? So that granny is…? Damn. No wonder she's so skilled. "She's probably someone you know, Mimi."

"Hm?"

My words seemed only to confuse her further. She was clearly trying her best to remember, but she seemingly couldn't recall anything. Elma, though, had apparently figured out the meaning of my words; she began to compare the faces of Mimi and the granny.

"You'll probably remember once we start talking," I told Mimi.

"I…see…"

I pulled the pondering Mimi with me into the lounge, and the granny pointed at a table and sofa.

"Is there good?" she asked.

"Sure. Mimi, Elma, come with me. Everyone else, sit in those chairs over there so you can hear. Mei, stay behind me."

"Aye aye," Tina responded.

She moved toward the chairs I'd indicated; Wiska and Dr. Shouko followed. Kugi, however, came over and whispered something to me.

"They are hardly leaking any thought waves, my lord, so they are likely wearing some sort of specialized equipment."

"Seems like it. If anything happens, I'll count on you."

Kugi nodded in response before quietly heading over to Tina and the others. The granny and her group silently watched—well, the young man was looking over each of the girls in turn, his expression agitated.

"Nice to meet you again. I'm Captain Hiro."

"I know who you are," the granny replied. "I spent a lot of time looking into you, so I'm already tired of seeing your face."

"Sorry for the trouble, but you could just have asked me directly. I would've answered what I could. So do you mind telling me your name? I already get the picture overall, but…"

"Hah…" the granny sighed in disappointment. She'd apparently been looking forward to surprising me. "Sure, I'll tell you my name… after you answer my questions."

"You… Fine. I know to respect my elders. Ask away."

In the end, I just wanted to learn their objective. As long as we could resolve the issue in a way that stopped their coming after us, that'd be enough for me. If some concessions were necessary to achieve that, then fine.

"I won't hold back, then. Who are you?" she demanded.

"Who am I…? Not an easy question to answer. You looked into me, didn't you? I'm a platinum-ranker with the mercenary guild, and by a stroke of luck, I was awarded a gold star and became an honorary viscount of the Grakkan Empire. So just your average guy."

Tina waved her hands in protest, but I pretended not to see her. I *was* a normal guy.

"I'm not interested in that kind of surface-level information. Where were you born, how were you raised, how did you acquire that ship, and why did you suddenly appear in the Tarmein System? Those are the things I want to know."

Hearing her inquiries, I fell silent. *Now, those are some tough questions. This granny really homed in on the critical issues.* "Those aren't answers I'm willing to give. Everyone has secrets about their past that they'd rather not divulge, right? To be perfectly honest, I'm not entirely sure of the answers to those questions myself."

"What?"

"I don't know how I ended up in Tarmein. I woke up one day and found myself in the cockpit of the *Krishna*—my ship—with the generators shut off. I got them back online, but then space pirates attacked me. I managed to defeat them and salvage their ship's

data, and from that data, I found Tarmein Prime's coordinates. When I arrived there, the star system army interrogated me. When I finally got back to my ship, I tried to investigate what was going on. I still couldn't figure anything out, so I decided to become a mercenary. Fortunately, my body remembered how to pilot a ship."

Backing me up, Elma added, "When he got to Tarmein Prime, Hiro was like a lost child who didn't know left from right. I can attest to that." She shrugged. "Not that he's any better now, to be honest."

The sharp granny raised her eyebrows in suspicion, chewing on what I'd said. "Not a very convincing tale. You want me to believe that someone with unclear origins rose to platinum rank? Since when is the Empire liberal enough to accept that?"

"Don't ask me. The powers that be might've decided behind closed doors, or maybe I just got lucky. Regardless of how it happened, I currently live an unfettered life in the Empire as a mercenary. Why do you want to know about all this, anyway? I still have no idea what your goal is."

"The answers are important to me. Still, I guess I'm beating around the bush. I'll just ask directly."

"Go for it."

"What was your motive in approaching Mimi? Who are you working for? If you lie, I'll cut your head off."

The granny's piercing and intimidating tone was quite impressive. But as for how Mimi and I reacted…

"Why are you two just looking at each other? Answer me!"

"So, uh…I wasn't working for anyone when I met her. As for my motive… Well, we met completely by chance. And if I had to give a reason for saving her… I guess it was because I couldn't abandon her. Mimi's really cute, after all."

"It was fate!" Mimi said with a smile, hugging my arm.

Excellent. I'll never get tired of this feeling. Under those circumstances, I'd probably do the same thing every time—still, I'd

like to pat my past self on the back.

"Give me a real answer."

"That *was* a real answer… If thugs are dragging a cute girl like Mimi into an alleyway, any normal guy will try to save her despite the obstacles."

"Yeah. Putting aside whether the guy's capable of deciding and acting that fast, that is theoretically true," the man in the other group agreed. He'd just been quietly listening until now.

"Right? I admit that I might've had ulterior motives—such as thinking that she and I might get closer if I saved her. If you asked me to break it down, though, I'd say I helped her 30 percent out of indignation, and 30 percent out of potential regret if I didn't act, with 40 percent ulterior motives."

"Aren't you're fudging those numbers a bit? Your ulterior motives making up 50 or 60 percent sounds more likely to me."

"Well, I guess. You might be right. But my reaction on the spot was mostly fueled by indignation and not wanting to feel bad about abandoning her."

I glanced over at Elma, who looked away uncomfortably. Back then, I hadn't been the hero I was today, and Elma had assumed I was just some guy with a ship. Thus, she'd told me that I'd be better off not sticking my head into other people's business. We'd been strangers back then, so her reaction was completely natural, but having been in favor of abandoning Mimi probably made her uncomfortable in retrospect.

"So you're saying that you didn't have any particular motive, nor were you working for anyone; you really just happened to meet Mimi by chance. You rescued her, then took her aboard your ship…?"

"Yeah. Back then, I wasn't even aware of the custom regarding what happens to women who board a man's ship. I only heard about it after I'd finished the paperwork to take her with me, and I was completely shocked."

Mimi blushed a little in embarrassment. “Eh heh heh… How nostalgic.” This conversation was really a bit suggestive.

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“Hang on. I’m thinking.”

The granny placed her hand against her forehead as if nursing a headache, then hung her head with a sour expression. She’d thought that a suspicious man was preying upon her granddaughter, so she’d gone out to beat him up, only to find that nothing was particularly wrong with the man, and that her granddaughter was with him by choice, not force. *Yeah… That’d be one bitter pill to swallow.*

“Master Hiro, just who is this person?” Mimi asked.

“You can’t tell? If you lay it all out, that should be pretty obvious.”

“Lay it all out…?”

“She’s obviously a mercenary. A veteran mercenary at that. She knows who you are and values you. She uses a sword, and she’s had extensive physical enhancements. But she looks younger than she is, which could cause confusion.”

“I’m going to kill you,” the granny threatened, still hanging her head. It wasn’t as if I’d said that she was *pretending* to be younger. Still, I supposed that youth and age were topics best left alone. Seemingly having gathered her thoughts, the granny then lifted her head. “Hah…I thought *that man* sent you.”

By “that man,” she was likely referring to the emperor. “Nope. If possible, I’d rather not have anything to do with that guy. That’s why I try not to get too close to the capital… Oh—I see. That’s why you were waiting here?”

It wasn’t that my pursuers had a vast net encompassing even the Arein System; it was more that they couldn’t set up a net until they were as far from the capital as Arein. They didn’t want to get

too close to the center of the Grakkan Empire, because they didn't want the emperor to discover them.

"That's how it is," she confirmed. "There's plenty of work here, and although it's on the outskirts, you can still find cutting-edge technology. It wasn't a bad place to wait."

Then the accursed granny took off her visor and looked at Mimi. *You really can see some of Mimi's facial features on her. No, wait. It's the opposite: you can see some of the granny's facial features on Mimi.*

"We haven't met for over ten years, Mimi. I'm Celestia." Lady Celestia's mouth curved into a smile. "I'm the mother of your father, Folto."

***

"It doesn't seem like I need to explain who I am to *you*," Celestia said to me.

"Nope. We have a fervent fan—mmgh!"

Elma had jabbed her elbow into me with unprecedented swiftness, landing a clean hit. It hurt badly—no joke. *That's not going to have damaged my ribcage, is it?*

"I-I'm not super familiar with your story," I began again, "but I know you're of noble origin, and that Mimi is too. We found that out when we visited the capital."

Mimi was looking at her grandmother with an ambivalent expression. "I remember now. I only met you once before, when I was young. Back then, you said you were a distant aunt…"

"As you can see, I don't really look my age. That's why I told you that when you were younger. I didn't want to get too involved in Folto's life."

I believed that "Folto" was the name of Mimi's dad. She'd occasionally told me stories about her past, and I thought she'd

mentioned that name before. *Hm? When did that happen? In bed, of course. We occasionally talk about ourselves after doing the deed.*

"I doubt you want outsiders to hear the rest of this conversation," I noted, "so would you like to take this elsewhere?"

"Since I plan to leave the Empire, that doesn't really matter to me," Celestia replied. "It'd make things harder for you around here, though, so how about we move to your room?"

"That'd probably be safe enough, but…" We still had to decide what to do about the guards we'd employed from Iga Security and Koga Services respectively. I also wasn't sure whether I was allowed to invite nonregistered guests into our suite. "Mei, check with the front desk."

"Yes, Master."

After giving Mei that order, I called Ota over. "So, yeah… I want to have a bit of a private conversation."

"We're not responsible for anything that happens while we're not present," Ota warned me.

"Don't worry. I don't intend to blame anything on you guys. But she doesn't seem to want to kill me anymore…though I still can't drop my guard."

I still had no idea why Celestia had wanted to kill me in the first place. However, since she likely didn't want to explain herself in public, I had no choice but to put my head into the lion's mouth.

In any case, at least based on appearances, Celestia was seemingly the only one in her group skilled at close combat. On the other hand, I had Mei and Elma with me; if things devolved into a fight, we wouldn't be the ones at a disadvantage.

It took some time, but we got both the hotel and the security companies to agree to our request. The guards would stay on standby in the lounge, while the rest of us would head to the suite we'd booked.

Once we got there, Celestia remarked, "Hmph. Rooms for nobles are all the same."

"Can we reaaally go in?" the woman she'd brought asked. "This place looks suuuper priiicy!"

"Hah…what a nice suite," the man added. "Someday, I'd like to be able to bring girls to rooms like these."

The group had begun sharing their impressions of our suite as soon as we exited the elevator. *Celestia's crew seems pretty down to earth. Is that by design?*

"Make yourselves at home," I said. "Mei, get us something to drink."

"Yes, Master."

After everyone had found a sofa or chair to sit on and gotten comfortable, I resumed the conversation we'd been having downstairs. "So where were we?"

"The unknown woman monitoring us was actually Mimi's grandmother," said Elma. "We stopped there."

"Ah, right." I turned to Celestia. "The reason you were so concerned about my background was your concern that I might've targeted Mimi for her lineage?"

Discussion of Mimi's lineage required discussion of Celestia's identity. It really wasn't that complicated: Mimi's grandmother had once been part of the Grakkan Empire's imperial family, but she'd run away from home. The current emperor was her older brother.

Granny Celestia was that frigging emperor's little sister, and Mimi was her granddaughter. That meant that Mimi was the emperor's grandniece. Thus, she was a rightful member of the imperial family—though just barely.

"I understand," said Dr. Shouko. "I've seen holo-pictures of Princess Luciada before, and since she and Mimi are practically twins, I thought Mimi might be the emperor's secret child or something. So she's actually Celestia's granddaughter."

Dr. Shouko was our newest crew member, and part of the reason I was explaining all this was to bring her up to speed. Granny Celestia didn't speak up in response, which meant this information was mostly accurate, or at least that she was okay with people considering it accurate. In any case, we'd done a DNA test in the capital, so it wasn't as if there was much room for doubt.

"Getting back on track, why were you so eager to kill me? I clearly sensed violent, malicious intent directed at me."

"Well, I went back to check on Folto's family for the first time in years, only to find that they'd passed away in an accident, and Mimi had gone missing. I gathered information only to find that a suspicious mercenary with an unclear background had taken her away with him. That mercenary had then gone to the capital and gained the emperor's favor. I figured you were a good-for-nothing bastard who'd used Mimi to enter the emperor's inner circle."

"…I see. The information provided by the mercenary guild didn't really give you insight into what the actual person was like. I'm not exactly nobility."

No, I wasn't a scheming noble. It annoyed me that Celestia had thought that I saved Mimi to use her as a pawn to move up in the world, but she'd had no way to know otherwise. It hadn't helped that my background prior to showing up in the Tarmein System was a complete mystery, however hard anyone looked into it. From Granny Celestia's perspective, a blank slate like that meant that I had connections that could erase all traces of me perfectly—connections only a high-ranking imperial noble would have. From there, it wasn't a stretch to assume that I was someone favored by the imperial family, and that I'd been sent on a mission to arrange the murders of Folto and his family. Then, with nowhere else to go, Mimi would have no choice but to rely on me.

"I also just had a lot of pent-up rage," Celestia added. "Those bastards who schemed against Folto and Myna and made Mimi suffer had all been cleaned out already without my doing anything. The only target I could still direct my anger at was you."

"Myna" was the name of Mimi's mom, although Granny Celestia's references to their family were generally centered on Folto, since—as the DNA test indicated—her son was Mimi's father.

"*That's* what led to all this? Give me a break…"

"Things only blew up like this because you overreacted," Celestia retorted. "A normal person wouldn't react to murderous intent from so far away."

"So it's my fault?" I furrowed my brow.

Before I could continue, Mimi opened her mouth. "Um… Celestia… Lady Celestia."

"What is it? You're my granddaughter; you don't need to refer to me as 'lady.'"

"Okay. Um…why?" That "why?" mixed multiple complicated emotions: confusion, uncertainty, and a trace of anger. It must've been quite heavy to Celestia.

"Why…? Why, indeed? Well, Folto was his own man, and I chose to respect that. That's all there was to it. Unfortunately, luck wasn't on his side. Nor was it on Myna's, or yours."

"Luck…wasn't on our side?"

"That's right. It wasn't. Nor on mine. If I'd gone back to the colony prior to Folto and Myna's deaths—or arrived immediately afterward, at the very least—you wouldn't have had it so tough. Unfortunately, I was three countries and thousands of light years away. News of their passing only got to me a month ago." Granny Celestia shrugged.

Since she'd heard about their deaths despite that great distance, she must've arranged for some system to alert her if anything strange occurred. Celestia's circumstances made it difficult for her to do as she pleased in the Empire, and Folto had likely had his own reasons to want to live independently on Tarmein Prime, rather than under Celestia's protection. Considering those factors,

her couching things as "luck not being on their side" was likely quite appropriate.

"I…see…" said Mimi.

"That's just how it is sometimes, unfortunately. At times like these, those left behind can't do much. Just resolve things or settle accounts."

"Resolve things…or settle accounts."

"You resolve things by looking after whatever the departed left behind. You settle accounts by taking revenge for them."

"That's quite a violent pivot," I teased. In response, the old woman glared at me. The look didn't really scare me, but I had to admit that it was intimidating.

"In any case, the emperor seemingly settled accounts for me, since a purge took place on Tarmein Prime before we got there. The bastards who tricked Folto, as well as several other bureaucrats, were executed or shipped off to prison colonies. The count responsible for managing that star system was also held to account and ended up losing his position. The colony's apparently much safer these days."

"I guess that's a perk of the emperor's position, but…wasn't that a clear abuse of power?"

Celestia shrugged. "He's the emperor. It's not like anyone can rein him in."

True. And if there hadn't been real issues, he wouldn't have found anything warranting a purge. If people had been purged, that meant they'd broken the law in some way.

The slum-like Third Division district was really quite a lawless place. It contained so many down-and-out people without proper jobs that it was only natural that the person in charge was blamed and removed. That was the country's border, after all.

Celestia continued, "After confirming the situation on Tarmein Prime, we traced you, reached this colony, and set up a surveillance

net. Then you guys showed up."

"She had her fists raised, ready to beat up the guys who'd wronged her granddaughter, only to find out that the emperor beat her to the punch!" the young man interjected. "Then who appears but you, bro—flirting with that very granddaughter!"

"So you just took your anger out on me? What the hell?"

"Didn't I say that at the start? I'm quite satisfied with how things turned out, though, since I was able to confirm your abilities," Celestia replied, smirking. She elegantly sipped the tea Mei had prepared.

This damn granny! She really is related to that frigging emperor!

***

"I'm exhausted."

As I listened to that damn granny talk, I sank into the sofa, surrounded by Mimi, Elma, and the mechanic twins. The discussion was mostly finished, so Dr. Shouko was messing with her tablet by herself nearby. She really did everything at her own pace.

"You're welcome to my tails, my lord."

Kugi perched next to me, and I started petting her fluffy tails. "Ah…I can feel my worries fading away…" Her tails both felt and smelled wonderful; I wanted to sniff them forever.

As for the Iga and Koga ninja, we'd contacted them earlier and said that they were free to go, and that they could just leave minimal personnel to watch over us. Celestia and I had already reached an accord of sorts, so there likely wouldn't be any more violence.

"I'll rub your shoulders, Master."

"Thanks. Ah! There. There. Ooh!"

The young man and woman from the granny's crew were looking over at me.

"…I'm going to make it big too one day."

"As big as hiiim? Aren't you aiming a little hiiigh?"

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't yet found out what their names were. "Sorry… I was basking in the relief of overcoming a huge threat, but I still haven't learned your names."

"Oh, I'm Nicholas. Celes took me in, and now I mess with mechanical stuff and do odd errands for her."

"I'm Laaattis. I was also taken in by Celes, and I work as her operatooor."

Nicholas and Lattis both seemed like normal humans. Nicholas was a soft-looking man dressed in mercenary attire and sporting a faux-hawk haircut. Lattis was a woman with a demure appearance and average-sized breasts. She had well-shaped facial features, but she didn't particularly stand out. The pair didn't have obviously muscular builds, so they probably weren't great at close combat.

"I feel like I was just appraised."

"It's obvious where you're looking, you knooow?"

"Sorry; can't help it in our business. I'm not really good at appraising mechanics or operators' skills, though."

"Oh, I'm pretty average, honestly," Nicholas said. "Lattis is incredible, though."

"Not reeeeally. I don't think I could beat that Maidroid over theeere."

"Any human who could surpass Mei one on one would no longer be human, honestly. I can't outshine her either outside of space battles or close combat."

I actually had faced off with Mei before, using a simulator. We played mirror matches against each other, both fighting with the same model of ship. Mei made perfect, precise movements—exactly

as you'd expect a machine to maneuver—but that made her predictable too. She always made the optimal move, so as long as you had a way of dealing with it, beating her wasn't so hard.

In terms of close combat, I could now defeat her if I used my psionic powers. Even Mei had no way of fielding attacks that required nonphysical responses.

"Whaaat? She's an AI with a small positron braaain installed, right?"

"Yeah…?"

For some reason Lattis had recoiled from me. "You can actually beeeat that thing? In a simulator space baaattle?!"

"I've won each of a total of twelve matches."

"Yes," Mei confirmed. "I lost all twelve."

"You're joooking!" Lattis was now visibly leery.

I didn't understand why. "Is that really so insane?"

"It's pooossible to beat machine intelligence with numbers, but only a complete freak could beat it one on one in a miiirror match. That's like beating one of those shiiitty unclearable games that constantly chaaanges without making a siiingle mistake in one tryyy."

"Yikes. What the heck…?" Nicholas chimed in. "I can't even envision what you're saying. Was it harder than the gold-rank test program?"

"Oh, beating Mei is way more challenging. That test is a complete joke."

When I signed up for the mercenary guild upon first arriving in this universe, I'd been given that test. I remembered it as completely boring and stupidly easy.

"I seeee. You're a professional weiiirdo," Lattis said.

"Professional weirdo. Good phrase," Nicholas remarked.

"I don't mind a girl calling me that, but it's annoying hearing a guy say it."

Hearing a girl call me a freak was kind of a turn-on. Hm? It shouldn't have been? *Wait—Kugi, Mei, how come it looks like you two just had a revelation? I don't actually have that kink…*

"Bro, how can I become like you? I want to flirt with a ton of girls too."

"I'm not your 'bro.' But to be like me…I guess you need luck and timing?"

"Useless advice!" I'd replied seriously to his serious question, but it seemed he didn't like my answer.

"I didn't aim to arrive where I am today," I elaborated. "You do need the courage to take the first step, though, and the confidence to act on your beliefs. You heard earlier about how I met Mimi, right?"

"I did."

"An innocent girl is saaaved from hoodlums by a meeercenary. That meeercenary invites her aboard his shiiip, where he forcibly… Anyway, eventually they develop mutual feeeelings. Sounds like a hooolo-novel's plooot," Lattis commented.

"I didn't *force* her to do anything, okay? I was the one in for a surprise after inviting her onto my ship. At any rate, that situation with Mimi is what I was referring to in terms of needing courage and confidence. As for Elma… I also helped her out when she was in trouble."

"What do you have to do to encounter so many situations where you can save cute girls and beautiful women?"

"Uh…be lucky, I guess?"

"I can't control that!"

Those encounters were probably where my ability to manipulate fate—or however Kugi had put it—came into play. But

that wasn't something I controlled consciously, so I had no choice but to refer to it as luck.

"In any case, helping Elma back then pretty much required me to drain my savings. Another example of courage."

"And finaaancial strength."

"In the end, the world runs on money," Nicholas remarked.

"It's true that money can resolve most problems you encounter," I agreed. That didn't mean it solved *all* your problems, though. If you were dealing with someone who had no interest in money or material things, it was useless. "I'm aware that luck operates a lot differently for me than for most people, but that's not always good. I pretty much attract problems—literally."

"Your eyes just immediately glazed over," Nicholas noted.

"A commissioned military officer took an interest in me and started following me around to turn me into her subordinate. After destroying a pirate base, I returned to the local colony only to find it was overrun with mysterious monsters and had become a hellscape. Then, I got involved in some political intrigue involving an imperial noble who tried to cut me down with his sword. At that point, the officer I just mentioned showed up again and made me join her in landing on a planet in the midst of terraforming, where I had to fight biological weapons of double-digit heights. Enviable experiences, right? Want to trade?"

Nicholas turned down my offer with a grave expression. "No way. I don't have enough lives to expend on that."

Figures. I'd turn it down myself in his shoes.

"You also charged through a swarm of crystal life-forms by yourself."

"That wasn't so dangerous."

"You make absolutely zero sense sometimes," Nicholas said.

"There's a reason people call him 'Crazy.'"

"It's been a while since I heard that nickname. Thinking about it, isn't it just an insult?" I asked, looking over at Lattis while fluffing Kugi's tails. *Hey, how come you're looking away? You must agree. That's why you're avoiding my eyes.*

"Ahhh…right. Um…what about meeting her? I think her name…is Kugi?"

"Forcibly changing the subject, I see. As for Kugi… Uh…how do I put it…?"

"It was destiny," Kugi said.

"That's how she views it," I added.

"More advice I can't act on. How about those two dwarves, then?"

"I went to check on my ship while it was under maintenance, only for the older twin to suddenly fling her sister directly at me like a torpedo."

"Wait, what? Sorry, can you repeat that?"

"I went to check on my ship while it was under maintenance, only for the older twin to suddenly fling her sister directly at me like a torpedo. That led to this and that, and finally resulted in the shipbuilder sending them to me as dispatched mechanics."

"'This and that'?"

"I won't go into detail, to protect their image, but a lot happened. In the end, it also came down to money."

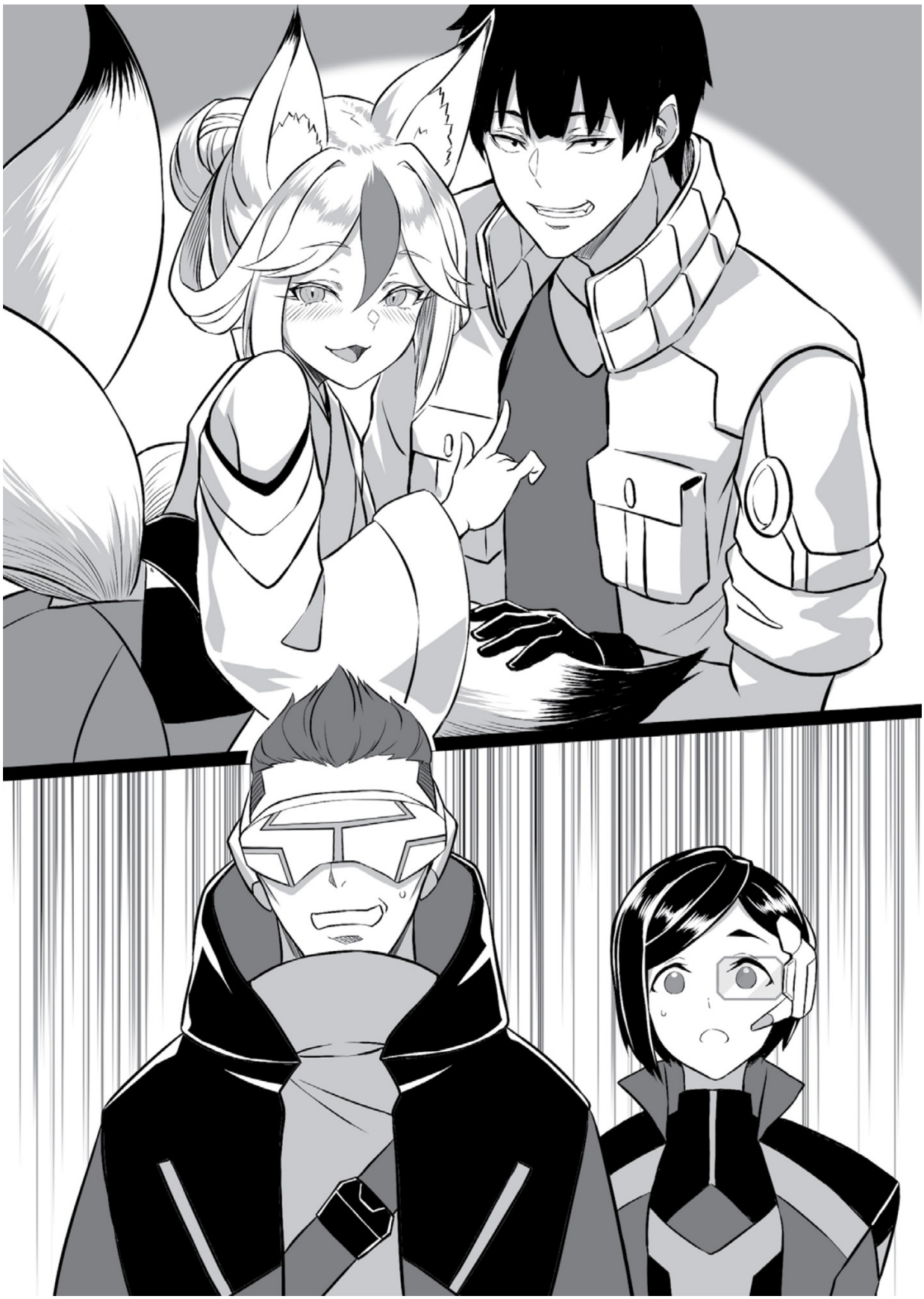
"Money?"

"Skilled ship mechanics make a lot, right?"

"Do they? Well, I guess they make a lot more than those working for companies. I hear company mechanics don't even make five thousand a month."

As a ship mechanic himself, Nicholas likely knew how much mechanics could earn on mercenary ships. I wasn't sure how advanced his own ship's facilities were. Even if it didn't have facilities

on par with the *Black Lotus*'s hangar, though, a mechanic could still produce quite a profit by repairing parts salvaged from pirate vessels, as long as they had the minimum necessary tools. A mechanic's presence made a big difference in how much money a mercenary vessel could bring in.



"Money isn't everything, though. Luck and compatibility do matter in the end," I said.

"Is that so…?" replied Nicholas.

Sorry. I don't think I can actually give you any useful advice. In any case, I recommend you start by treasuring the people by your side right now. I'll leave it at that.

***

"See you later, Mimi. If he makes you cry, contact me. I'll deal with him for you."

"Ah ha ha… I'll be fine. Hiro's really nice."

"Hmph…I'd really prefer to take you with me. But…" Celestia glared at me.

I waved dismissively back, signaling her to hurry up and leave.

Having spoken with my crew—mostly with Mimi—the old lady seemed satisfied, and she was prepared to leave. We'd come down to the lobby to see her off. *Since we're going to the trouble of seeing you off, though, can you just leave peacefully already?*

My wishes seemed to reach her, since she turned toward the exit…

"Oh, right."

…only to suddenly turn and face me again.

"Other rats are sneaking around, investigating you guys. Watch out, you hear me?"

"What? Give me a break already…"

Just when I thought I'd put all this trouble behind me, I was hearing that this was the tip of the iceberg. What a joke. Not a funny one either.

"Has this colony always been so dangerous?" I asked.

"Going by its security level, it should be quite safe…" Dr. Shouko answered with a wry smile.

What're you smiling about? Damn it. In any case, I'll have to figure out why those other people are investigating us and then deal with them too.

The moment we'd decided to stay in a colony for an extended period, this was happening. And one of our ships was currently unusable. If we could stay aboard the *Black Lotus*, though, we'd only have to be on guard whenever we left it. In the worst-case scenario, we could deal with most threats by turning on the vessel's low-power shields as long as we were aboard. Even if attackers managed to get on, the *Black Lotus* was equipped with combat bots.

"Well, it's not like we'll have to change anything," I said. "We already contracted Iga Security until the *Black Lotus*'s upgrades finished, and this hotel's security probably reflects its price."

"You're not being thorough enough," Celestia said. "You should at least put in effort to flush your pursuers out and deal with them yourself."

"Why would I go that far? I'm not some bloodthirsty maniac. Anyway, I haven't got that much free time to begin with."

"You just want to laze around while a bunch of girls surround and wait on you."

"That's definitely a way more effective use of my time than diving directly into a fire. I've got more than enough trouble. Just dealing with whatever embers float my way is the best policy."

I attracted enough problems as it was, so there was no reason to go look for them; trouble would find me either way. *Still, I'm not the type to* seek *it. Well, okay, maybe I… Never mind. Let's drop this topic*.

"How wimpy. Mimi…are you sure about this guy?" Celestia asked. "At this rate, the number of girls is only going to increase."

"I'm sure." Mimi answered. "I know everyone will get along!"

"Well, you heard her. If you make her a *little* sad, it's okay—but don't ever make her cry for real, you hear me? I'd cut off your balls and grill you with my laser gun."

"You sure say some scary things, Granny… But I'll do my best to avoid that."

"Hmph. Let's go, you two."

"'Kay. See you later, bro."

"Bye-byeee."

Nicholas nodded at me, while Lattis waved goodbye as they left with Celestia.

Will we ever meet again? I can't help feeling like we will. That granny is the same type as that frigging emperor, but she has fewer strings attached—she moves much more deftly. She'll definitely cause me trouble one day.

***

"Phew! In the end, nothing extreme happened, and everything resolved peacefully!" Tina said.

"What do you mean, 'resolved peacefully'?" I retorted.

Tina wore a casual outfit and held a beer in one hand. Looking around, I saw that everyone else was in leisurewear too.

"Do we plan on just spending the rest of the day chilling in our suite?"

"We know someone out there is investigating us. Why would we leave the hotel?" Elma asked, handing me a soft-drink bottle.

She has a point. If we could avoid trouble by just staying here, then that was the right decision. Fortunately, given the environments I'd once lived in, being cooped up indoors didn't bother me. I imagined that also applied to everyone who'd lived in colonies and other outer-space locations in this universe.

"Hear, hear! Let's drink and watch a holo-movie or something," Tina said.

"Taking time to rest is important too, Hiro," Wiska told me. "Being on edge all the time will exhaust you."

"I can't help feeling like you guys are pushing me in a certain direction so you can fulfill your desire to drink all day."

"That's simply your imagination," Elma said, almost forcibly sitting me down on the sofa before herself taking a seat next to me. Wiska sat on Elma's other side, while Tina settled on my lap. *Oh no. The drunkards have surrounded me.*

"We're switching positions later, Sis," Wiska said.

"Sure, if I remember," Tina replied.

"Jeez…"

Wiska and Tina began to bicker. It looked as though two children had started arguing, but they were really both adults holding drinks. *Make sure not to spill…*

"Kugi, let's play!"

"Okay, Mimi."

It was good that Kugi and Mimi were getting closer. Both took out their tablets; they were probably going to play a fighting game or something together.

"Oh, this looks interesting," Tina said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A movie about a part-time worker observing a man-eating mascot robot late at night through a fast-food joint's surveillance camera," Tina answered.

"I guess it's supposed to be a horror movie?" I asked.

"Why didn't they just take the mascot apart right away?" inquired Wiska.

"Sis, that'd defeat the point…"

"A normal company wouldn't produce a mascot robot that did that, so it'd definitely be the work of a third-rate unlicensed mechanic. Maybe a pirate?"

Wiska had jumped to a strange conclusion as she watched the movie preview on the holo-display. Applying her hypothesis, the movie would boil down to around-the-clock scrutiny of an illegally produced robot.

Since we'd paid for Iga Security's services, I figured we might as well just relax while they went around hunting whoever was investigating us. *Who is it this time? I still have no idea. Are they somehow related to the group that created Dr. Shouko? Probably not, since that happened so long ago. So just who is it…?*

***

We spent the next few days taking it easy in our suite. Perhaps thanks to that sedentary approach, nothing of particular note happened during those days. We had Iga Security assign us a skeleton crew of guards, while the other employees we'd hired were tasked with hunting down those "rats" or whatever who were looking into us.

Then, two days before the *Black Lotus*'s upgrades were scheduled to finish, Ota arrived at our suite before noon and informed us of what he'd found.

"Remnants of the Association for the Protection of Artificial Life?"

"Yes. They're, well…small fry, basically."

According to Ota, his people had noticed suspicious individuals the day after beginning their search. After that, they used various methods—which he wouldn't share with me—to track those individuals and investigate their backgrounds. Last night, they'd managed to unearth both the group behind the operatives and the group's base, which was why he was here today.

For the record, the man with fully artificial organs, Killam, was present as well, his business suit bursting at the seams as usual.

"So what do you want to do about them?" Ota asked.

"What do I want to do about them, eh…? They're from the same terrorist group that committed that bioterror attack before, right?"

I faintly recalled the Association for the Protection of Artificial Life being the perpetrators of that incident involving white monsters running amok in this colony last time we'd been here.

"Yes. The police want their members for terrorism."

"Then how about reporting them to the police and letting them handle it? I'm a mercenary, but it's not my line of work to scrap with people like that unless I've been requested to."

"Huh? It isn't?" Tina asked.

"Really?" Wiska asked.

"Yes, really."

The twins seemed doubtful, but I reaffirmed my stance. If a member of my crew had been kidnapped, that would've changed things, but that wasn't the case here. It would also be a different story if we were dealing with space pirates, but these were just normal people. Wait—maybe, if they were terrorists, they weren't. I supposed they kind of fit into the same box as pirates.

"We'll report them to the police, then."

"Do that."

I waved dismissively as I saw Ota and Killam off. *So is the problem covered now?*

"Why are those guys monitoring us, anyway?" I wondered. "Do they have a grudge against me for defending the city in power armor last time?"

"Hmm…who knows?" said Dr. Shouko. "But if they're still nursing a grudge, then it's likely against me for making those

extermination nanomachines. Oh—or maybe the fact that I'm a designer baby leaked?"

"Is that a real possibility?"

"It's not impossible. At least, plenty of people at the company knew."

Since these were members of the Association for the *Protection* of Artificial Life, were they looking for an opportunity to "protect" Dr. Shouko by taking her away? If so, what would they even be trying to protect her from? It wasn't as if anyone was threatening her.

"Who cares anyway?" Elma asked. "We can just leave the rest to the colony's public law enforcement or the star system army."

"That's true." I nodded at her comment. "But either way, we're staying put in this hotel until the *Black Lotus* is ready to go."

Then Mimi and Kugi looked over. *Hmm?*

"Um…isn't it already safe for us to head outside?" asked Mimi.

"Iga Security may inform law enforcement, but that doesn't mean those informed will act immediately. We should stay put at least until we hear news of the group members being arrested."

"I see… How unfortunate." Kugi's ears drooped in disappointment.

Seeing her so despondent was painful. But terrorists weren't exactly logical, so there was no telling what they'd do. In some ways, they were even more dangerous than Granny Celestia.

I definitely wasn't refusing to leave the suite to avoid fulfilling Kugi's wish to visit the cultured meat plant. *Definitely not. Really.* "The upgrades should finish in two days, and then we can say goodbye to this cramped lifestyle. Hang in there."

"Yes, my lord." Kugi's ears perked up again as she nodded.

Her expression elegantly conveyed to me her assumption that I'd take her to the factory when our ship was ready—which hurt.

Please don't look at me with such sparkling eyes. Just imagining how that light would leave that bright gaze once we were actually there is painful.

***

Nothing of particular note happened, and the date when the *Black Lotus*'s overhaul would be complete finally arrived. As for the members of that terrorist organization? The police arrested them without incident. I wasn't sure whether they'd captured every last one, but the previous evening, the colony's news channel had spent quite a bit of time covering the arrest. Now we were in the hotel lobby to check out.

For some reason, we found Granny Celestia waiting there for us. Nicholas and Lattis were with her, naturally.

"About time," said Celestia. "Hurry up."

"Why…?"

"I've yet to assess your abilities fully," she told me. "I've seen your close combat skills; now I need to see your piloting skills."

"What're you suggesting…?"

The old lady smirked. "There's only one way for a mercenary to demonstrate their skills. Let's get to work."

I'm getting déjà vu. She and the emperor really are siblings, damn it. Looking up at the lobby's high ceiling, I cursed internally.

Chapter 6:
The Joint Operation

"THIS PLACE IS CRAZY."

"It's like a paaassenger shiiip."

Examining the *Black Lotus*'s interior, Nicholas and Lattis reacted in the typical manner most people did.

The granny, on the other hand, didn't seem impressed. "Hmph. Comes off so weak. A mercenary ship should look like a mercenary ship."

"In my opinion, only an idiot would deliberately make their furnishings less convenient to make themselves look more badass," I countered.

Given how she'd phrased her comment, I couldn't help wondering whether she was at fault for the type of mercenary culture that had developed within the Empire. If so, it was quite a serious sin she'd committed.

"You snap at every little thing, don't you?" the granny remarked.

"You started it by complaining about our furnishings. Whatever… This conversation isn't going anywhere. Let's get down to business."

I led the group to the *Black Lotus*'s lounge.

"I'll go prepare drinks, my lord," Kugi volunteered.

"Thanks."

As she quietly left, Celestia glanced at me suspiciously. "That girl is from Verthalz, right? Why's she following you? She even calls you 'my lord.'"

"As you already know, I can use psionic powers. Their extent is considerable, to say the least. She was basically assigned as my chaperone."

"Does that mean you came from the Holy Empire of Verthalz?"

"No. Though, according to Kugi, they'd treat me quite well if I went there. Still, I prefer living as a mercenary."

"Ah—you're that type too? Must be tough on the people around you."

"Buzz off," I said, then gestured toward the seats around the lounge's holo-display table. "Anyway, make yourself comfortable."

I sat down myself, as did Elma; Kugi would as well, once she returned from fetching us drinks. As for the others, they were off checking out the ship's recently renovated research area.

"Where's Mimi?" Celestia asked.

"She's making sure everything we ordered got installed properly. We'd be over there too if you guys hadn't suddenly shown up."

"My bad. As you get older, you also get a bit impatient." She didn't seem apologetic in the slightest.

As Celestia and I continued our verbal sparring, Kugi returned with water bottles for the group. Strangely, normal water was more expensive than soft drinks in this universe.

"Our drinks are here, so let's get down to business."

"Yeah. Well, this really isn't that complicated," the granny began. "We've been here for quite some time now, and we have to earn enough to pay our daily expenses. Most importantly, sitting around doing nothing is damn boring, so we tend to go casually hunt space pirates."

"I see. Wait—are you even registered with the mercenary guild?"

"Yeah. I'm the mercenary Granny Farin. Currently silver rank."

"Are they even running that guild properly…?"

"When you've lived as long as I have, it's normal to have developed a back door or two that you can use to bend rules." Celestia smirked.

I was sure she found this amusing, but it actually made me question my faith in the mercenary guild's legitimacy and integrity. Well, in the end, the guild was a business that dealt in life and death; it wasn't exactly an organization of heroes. I supposed engaging in under-the-table deals came with the territory.

Anyway, thinking too deeply about it was pointless. Whatever darkness lurked under the surface, the guild fulfilled its contracts and paid me what I was owed. It was invaluable to mercenaries like me. I just had to be careful not to stick my nose anywhere it didn't belong. As long as it didn't collude with space pirates, the guild was fine in my book.

"In any case, we're getting sidetracked. So…?" I prompted.

"When you hunt space pirates, it's to be expected that you'll harvest some things, right? Well, we've managed to salvage some pirate data caches."

Data caches. As one would expect, a space pirate's data cache usually contained violent pornography and snuff films, but it also occasionally held a personal journal and information related to business dealings. They also sometimes stored flight data. The former finds were completely useless, but the latter few occasionally proved handy.

"I think I see where this is going," I said. "Are you serious about this?"

"Oh, are you getting cold feet?" the granny asked me mockingly.

She intended for us to cooperate to destroy a pirate base using just our two teams. I figured there was an 80 or 90 percent chance that she'd extracted pirates' flight patterns from their data caches.

Tracing the flight patterns of multiple ships, it'd be easy to pinpoint the location of the base these pirates used.

"I need more information," I told her. "This isn't something I can just casually agree to."

"That's true. Lattis."

"Yeees, ma'am. I'll be borrowing your holo-display here, okay?"

After asking my permission, Lattis used her tablet to project an image onto the holo-display built into the table.

"That's the target?"

"Yeah. I scouted the place already, of course," Celestia told me boastfully.

I ignored her, examining the projected image of what looked like an asteroid adapted into a pirate base.

The base definitely wasn't very big, and in addition to being on the small side, it appeared to have much less weaponry than the Red Flag base I'd gone after before. The pirates had more batteries of laser cannons than missile pods, but those cannons appeared to be of low quality, and there weren't many of them overall.

"You picked out a pretty good target," I said. "This seems doable."

"Oh? Got a plan?" asked Celestia.

"We fire on them preemptively in a frontal assault, then take out any pirates that get mad and come out of the base to fight us. Without an overwhelming edge in close combat, that's the easiest strategy."

Fortunately for us, the pirates' defensive turrets were mostly grouped together. If we started by firing at those with reactive anti-ship torpedoes or the *Black Lotus*'s electromagnetic launcher, we should mostly eliminate them. Any pirates that emerged then we could take out in a direct skirmish. That would ultimately reduce the number of pirates inside the base and make it easier to subjugate.

When the Imperial Fleet went after pirates, they usually targeted the cannons closest to the hangar containing the pirate ships. Since their goal was to eliminate every craft without letting a single one escape, it made sense to shoot out the pirates' legs first. And when imperial marines fought in person, pirates were no more than moving targets; they had nothing to worry about on that front.

In contrast, it was best for mercenaries like us—who had significantly less power in close combat—to avoid such combat as much as possible. If we managed to win the space battle, but lost the battle on the ground, it would be no laughing matter. That was why I preferred to allow the pirates to emerge and fight us, rather than destroying their hangar.

Of course, that would mean some pirates judging that they couldn't beat us and trying to run away. Some would probably escape, even with *Antlion*'s gravity jammer disrupting them. Still, by taking out the pirates' base, we'd deal them a heavy blow.

We'd also receive quite a haul from the operation. The stolen goods the pirates had stored on the base would obviously become ours, and after we finished up, we could report the results to the star system army or Imperial Fleet. We'd subsequently get a significant bounty for our efforts.

"The easiest strategy is to crush them in a frontal assault? You talk a big game."

"*We* could do it. How about you?"

"I had the same plan in mind, of course. Pirates are just pirates, after all, however many there are. We're also good at taking on multiple foes at once."

"I see. I look forward to seeing your abilities, then."

"That's my line."

With a resigned look, Elma watched Celestia and I smile provocatively at each other. I really did want to know how good the

granny was, and my wallet had felt a little light lately. This *was* actually a pretty good opportunity for us.

"So you're on board?" Celestia asked.

"Yeah. How will we split the loot? If my crew has more and bigger ships, we should naturally get a bigger cut."

"What're you talking about? You're a greedy bastard, aren't you? We're the ones who brought you this information, so of course *we're* getting the bigger cut. Do you even know how many ships we'll bring?"

"I doubt you've got a large fleet with you. If you do, then show me."

"You bastard…"

I wasn't sure how hastily Celestia had rushed here upon learning of Mimi's situation, but even if she'd once led a large fleet, she likely only had a few ships with her right now—three at most, and all small. Since she'd been in a hurry, she couldn't have brought less speedy medium or large ships; they'd have slowed her down.

Heh heh heh… This is gearing up to be a fun negotiation.

***

"Okay, so we're all agreed, then?" I asked.

"Fine," Granny Celestia answered, shrugging.

The conditions we'd finally settled on were as follows. First, the yields from an individual pirate ship—including its bounty—would go to whoever shot it down. As for the reward for destroying the base itself, we eventually agreed to split it evenly. Celestia's party had two small ships, so they'd have had trouble taking down the base by themselves. Still, they'd scouted out and acquired the intel about the base to begin with; without that information, this operation wouldn't be taking place. Strength was important, but info was just as vital, so we'd decided to go fifty-fifty.

Finally, for loot recovered from the base, we settled on a seventy-thirty split favoring my crew. Setting aside the *Black Lotus*, which didn't even need to be mentioned, the *Antlion* was technically a medium ship with more cargo space than small ships had—though specialized equipment took up most of that space. The *Antlion* did, however, have low specs for a medium ship.

The *Krishna* could now rely on the *Black Lotus*'s cargo to resupply, so its cargo hold was also almost empty. Compared to Celestia's fleet of just two small vessels, we had significantly more carrying capacity, so we would get a larger share of the spoils.

I might've been able to push for an eighty-twenty or at least seventy-five-twenty-five split, but I didn't want to act too greedy. I wasn't about to treat Celestia the same as my own crew members, but she was still Mimi's grandmother.

"That's a pretty interesting ship," I said. "I have no idea what model it's supposed to be."

"It's one of those legacy ships you see from time to time," Elma replied.

We were examining Granny Celestia's ship—the *Annihilator*, which was quite the name—on the holo-display.

Legacy ships were old ships that'd been renovated so many times that their base model wasn't even clear. Some devolved into old, weathered vessels that were barely mobile, while others were turned into monsters bearing no resemblance to the original vessel either in appearance or specs.

Celestia's ship was definitely the latter. It had four stalker-missile pods that fired small missiles with powerful guidance systems; it also possessed two wide-angle heavy laser turrets. Two multi-cannons were also fixed to the ship's nose. In terms of firepower, the *Annihilator* wasn't outshone by the *Krishna*. It was about the *Krishna*'s size—rather large for a small ship, but still within that category. It likely used projectile weapons like missiles and multi-cannons because it didn't have a generator as powerful as the

Krishna's. In terms of plating, shields, and mobility, the *Krishna* was probably stronger defensively.

"Yeah, I use a legacy ship. So what?" Celestia thrust out her lower lip.

Nicholas spoke up, attempting to pacify her. "Its specs are good enough to compete with modern ships! And there's a lot of freedom to change out its parts. Maintaining it is quite an effort, though."

Lattis followed up. "You've taken gooood care of both its tangible and intangible qualities. It's a greeeat ship."

"If you can make full use of all its weapons, it'll definitely be effective against pirates."

Stalker missiles were slightly weaker than seeker missiles, but they still wouldn't have a problem dealing with the lightweight shields pirates used. A ship like Celestia's could take on a swarm of pirates in a frontal assault.

"And your other vessel is a fast recon ship," I noted.

"Nothing much to say about that one," Celestia said.

"Yeah. Toroni's ship isn't really suited to combat," Nicholas added.

You didn't see ships like that recon vessel often in the Empire, but you could more or less judge its capabilities just by looking at it. It was a small ship with a lot of thrusters, equipped with a Class-II laser cannon on its nose and two small seeker-missile pods. It was capable of battle, but it definitely wasn't designed for that. It was definitely a recon ship; it seemed to be equipped with a multitude of sensors. I suspected that it also had an ace up its sleeve somewhere.

Toroni was another member of Granny Celestia's crew, although we hadn't yet met him. The man supposedly specialized in information gathering and covert operations.

"I've never seen a ship like yours before either," Celestia told me.

"I'd be surprised if you had. Its origins are secret."

"Hmm? Well, whatever." Shrugging, Celestia added, "As long as it performs according to its specs."

She'd just given me a taste of my own medicine. Well, her caveat only stood to reason, since the *Krishna* also required specialized maintenance. Fortunately, we hadn't had any problems with its generator—which was still a complete black box—and the ship itself hadn't yet suffered any serious damage.

In the event that the *Krishna* really was severely damaged, including parts adjacent to the generator, we probably couldn't repair it at the moment. It'd be a write-off, most likely forcing me to get a new ship.

"We've agreed on a split, and we understand each other's fighting power, so let's get to work on a concrete plan of action," I urged.

"Yeah. We don't really need a complicated one, though. Your *Black Lotus* and my *Annihilator* will launch a frontal assault to attract the pirates' attention. Then, while they're distracted, you can launch reactive anti-ship torpedoes at their base turrets and destroy them. After that, we can just go with the flow. Oh—how about you go around the entire base and take out all their turrets?"

"You're pushing the dirty work onto me so you can go hunt bounties. It'd be faster if you approached the base and blew up their turrets with your stalker missiles."

"No thanks. I'd be shot down during my approach."

"That's why you want *me* to do it? Stop offloading dirty work onto us."

This granny sure had a nice personality. But it was true that—from a big-picture perspective—it would be more efficient for the

Krishna to clean up the remaining turrets, which it would be nearer to.

"Damn it. I guess I am closer."

"That's a good boy. So you do have some sense. Do your best to destroy them all, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I don't think I have to mention this, but make sure you prioritize protecting the *Black Lotus*."

"I'm not an idiot. Those pirates will definitely come out guns blazing, since we're attacking their base."

"We'll have to look out for reactive munitions," Elma said.

"Yeah. Getting hit by one of those is no joke," Nicholas added.

Pirates didn't use powerful weapons while hunting prey, since those would damage the goods they were targeting. But things would obviously be different if their base was under attack. They would indeed emerge firing with everything they had. They wouldn't hold back from launching all their seeker missiles; they might even have reactive anti-ship torpedoes or large missiles with reactive warheads. It wasn't unusual for people to underestimate the danger of attacking a pirate base and thereby suffer significant losses.

For the record, being directly hit by a reactive warhead would severely damage the *Krishna*, even through its three layers of shields. The *Black Lotus* wouldn't be immune either. A single anti-ship reactive torpedo striking its shield-saturation device could take down the entire ship. Missiles and torpedoes with reactive warheads weren't to be trifled with.

"Let's set out as soon as my crew finishes checking over the *Black Lotus*."

"Hm? Are you sure?"

"It's best to act quickly. There's no reason to delay either." I answered, shrugging.

After staring at me for a while, Celestia smirked as well. “Nice. I like your decisiveness.”

It seemed she was fond of people who could make on-the-spot decisions. Good for her. In any case, it would be smart for me to start getting things ready, but first I needed to contact Mimi and the others.

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“And that led you to decide to launch immediately?” Mimi asked.

“Yep,” I confirmed as I booted up the *Krishna* and launched its self-check program.

The *Krishna* was probably fine, since the twins never slacked in their duties. Still, it was best that a pilot never skipped running the self-check program and verifying with their own eyes that nothing was amiss. It wasn’t good to assume that the mechanics had done a perfect job, and that there wouldn’t be any issues. In the end, the girls were humans—well, dwarves—which meant they *could* make a mistake.

“Um, Master Hiro… I’m sorry to cause you problems all the time.”

“You haven’t caused me any problems, Mimi. Even if you had…”

“Even if I had…?”

“Well, I guess if it’s for your sake, handling a few problems is nothing.”

“If you’re going to start a sappy line, make sure to finish it,” Mimi giggled.

So she says, but I started to feel self-conscious halfway through saying that. Forgive me.

Kugi sat in the copilot's seat. She seemed lonely, so I stroked her head. Her tails started wagging, which was extremely cute. Still, I really wished she'd hold back a bit; I wasn't some kind of gigolo. Besides, my capacity for cuteness was already overflowing.

Yes, criticize me all you want, and say it's a bit too late for such regrets, or that they're all the consequences of my own actions. If I'd known that things would end up like this…I'd probably still have made the same choices. I figured I just had to accept my fate and deal with it.

"Um…will we approach using thermal stealth this time as well?" Mimi asked.

"I'd like to, but that'd be quite difficult. We're targeting a base inside an asteroid belt, and based on the data Granny Celestia provided, we probably couldn't get close using thermal stealth."

I projected that onto the *Krishna*'s main screen. As I'd pointed out, our target was inside an asteroid belt, and the asteroids around the base were quite dense outside its frontal path. That meant we'd have to be careful to avoid asteroids while approaching the base. Unfortunately, activating our thrusters while we were in thermal-stealth mode would immediately reveal our position, so that wasn't really doable.

"Then how will we… Oh. *That* again?"

"Yep."

"What do you mean?" Kugi asked, confused by our exchange.

As for what I meant…

"My lord! We're going to crash! Crash!"

"It's fine, it's fine."

Kugi screamed as if the world was about to end. She was definitely overreacting, though. We were indeed charging through the asteroid belt at top speed, but I wasn't the kind of loser who'd let his ship collide with stationary rocks. Even if we hit any, we had shields, so it wouldn't really matter. Probably.

I did have to concentrate on the main screen, so I couldn't check on Kugi. Still, I figured she'd probably fallen backward, teary-eyed, with drooping ears.

"Once we've made our way through, we'll most likely start fighting immediately, so be ready. Focus time, focus time."

"Wh-what?!"

"Everything will be okay, Kugi. Master Hiro won't crash into mere asteroids. He had no problem weaving through denser swarms of crystal life-forms." Mimi's voice sounded a bit flat as she said that.

Are those two okay? Since even I had to focus while charging through the asteroid belt at this speed, I still didn't really have the freedom to check.

"The sensors have picked up something, Master Hiro."

"Well, it's normal that they'd have defenses set up."

Pirates tended to be brainless idiots, but they weren't so dumb that they wouldn't put defenses around their base. Usually, at least. Some groups might really be too disorganized to do even that, but at the very least, the pirates we were attacking weren't.

"We're about to arrive, then."

"Yes, we're about to—we've arrived."

With my peripheral vision, I noticed a light representing an allied ship appear on the radar screen. About ten seconds before the *Krishna* exited the asteroid belt, that allied ship arrived and warped out of FTL travel with truly perfect timing. Such precision was definitely Mei's doing.

The *Krishna*'s sensors picked up a fight breaking out between the pirates at the base and my allies who'd just arrived. The initial strike was likely a shot from the *Black Lotus*'s large electromagnetic launcher. The pirates' attention had been focused on the *Krishna*, causing them to react late to the sudden appearance of the *Black Lotus,* the *Antlion,* and Granny Celestia.

Since they've landed a blow… "Fire reactive anti-ship torpedoes one and two!"

Having just exited the asteroid belt, the *Krishna* launched the two torpedoes from its lower hatch. They sped toward the pirate base's turret cluster at an incredibly high speed. Reactive anti-ship torpedoes didn't have very much momentum in and of themselves. When you fired them normally, they were as slow as turtles. But if you launched them from a ship moving as fast as the *Krishna* was moving, momentum would help the projectiles travel insanely fast.

"Kugi, prepare a shield cell."

"A-all right."

As I heard Kugi's fainthearted response, a ball of light formed along the side of the *Krishna* that faced the pirate base. Our torpedoes had exploded, unleashing a powerful wave of light and heat. That heat wave washed over the asteroid's surface, including the cluster of turrets, blowing them up. Aftershocks and debris assaulted *Krishna*'s shields.



"Sh-shield cell utilized!"

"Good. We'll fly close to the asteroid's surface and take out any turrets that remain."

The attack just now should've destroyed about 70 percent of the turrets, but some were still left. *I'll focus on the relatively dangerous missile turrets first.* "Mimi, contact the others. Have them send us the locations of the pirates' missile turrets."

"Understood!"

The *Krishna* had high-grade sensors for a small ship. Still, they were weaker than those on the *Black Lotus* and the *Antlion*. Pooling our sensor data would provide much more accurate information.

"Get ready—we're about to go for round two."

"All right!"

This time, the pair responded energetically. Kugi seemed to have bounced back, which was good. *Okay… Time to pluck off the pirates' limbs.*

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"Huh? That guy's got some skill."

The kid was practically crawling along the repurposed asteroid's surface, accurately taking out the pirate base's turrets as he did so.

Nicholas interrupted my thoughts with a panicked shout. "This isn't the time for that, Captain!"

"You really do lack composure," I chastised him. "That's why you're not popular with the ladies, Nicholas."

"We're currently being blanketed by lasers and seeker missiles! I think I'm relatively composed under the circumstances!"

The pirates were indeed firing lasers at us, but they were weak beams that we could easily stop by focusing our deflector shields to

the front. As for the seeker missiles, that robot maid's ship was shooting them all down with lasers, so there was no way the missiles would reach us. This job was a piece of cake. *Sheesh.*

"Multi-lock compleeete."

"Aye. Fire numbers one through four!" I cried.

A large wave of stalker missiles flickered one after another in rapid succession as they burned their propellant, chasing after the swarm of pirate ships.

Pirates cried out.

"What?! Missile alert!"

"Wait—those aren't seeker missiles! They're way too small!"

"They're fast! I can't shoot them down! Gaaah!"

The panicking pirates tried to destroy the stalker missiles, firing their lasers and multi-cannons wildly, but there was no way that would work. A stalker missile's warhead was only a third the size of a seeker missile's, and their fuel injectors fired sporadically, making their trajectory hard to calculate through optical or thermal data.

"Ahh, what a wonderful sound. I never get enough of hearing them scream."

"That's creeeepy."

"What are you talking about? Listening to pirates shriek is a mercenary's favorite pastime. That's the melody of the battlefield, so to speak."

"Whaaat?"

Lattis still thought like a normal person. From a normal person's point of view, enjoying your enemies' screams probably was creepy. Not that I cared.

"Hit confirmed. Ship exploded," Nicholas reported.

"What dirty fiiireworks."

Three stalker missiles per pirate ship: That was the *Annihilator*'s guaranteed pirate-killing recipe. The first missile took out their flimsy shields, the second destroyed the ship, and the third was insurance in case either of the prior two missed. If a pirate somehow survived, that was what my heavy laser turrets were for.

"This really is an easy job. We barely have to move," Nicholas commented.

"It doesn't seem like our allies are having as easy a time of it, though."

***

"Shield cells!"

"Okay!"

"Seeker missiles incoming!"

"Chaff and flares too!"

"All right!"

The pirates' resistance was stronger than I'd expected. There hadn't been anything wrong with Granny Celestia's information, but the guy in charge of the base's defenses seemed surprisingly capable.

While we distracted incoming seeker missiles with chaff and flares, I accelerated the *Krishna* and escaped the missiles' tracking range. Of course, those missiles didn't just magically disappear; instead, they crashed into the pirate base and exploded. Although it was unintentional, my evasive measures were fortunately damaging the base.

"Brace for a sharp turn!"

"Okay!"

"All right! Mwgh?!"

Pushing our thrusters to the maximum, I distanced the *Krishna* from the asteroid's surface. Then, cutting flight support, I used its

side thrusters to execute a spin. As I'd predicted, a swarm of seeker missiles appeared not far away. The *Krishna*'s missile-alert system had been screaming nonstop for a while now.

I fired our flak cannons, shooting down the seeker missiles that chased us. Then I dove straight into the explosions, switching the *Krishna*'s heavy laser cannons from automatic to manual targeting.

I held my breath, slowing time, and navigated our ship through the explosions, anxiously aligning the heavy laser cannons' frustratingly slow crosshairs with the seeker-missile pods targeting me.

One…two…three…four…five…six…seven. Okay. "Ha…! That's the last of them!"

"We've taken down all the seeker-missile pods in the enemy base!"

"Th-three shield cells left!"

"That's plenty. Let's destroy the remaining laser turrets too."

"Aye aye, sir!"

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Once we'd destroyed all the pirate base's turrets, successfully eliminating their methods of resistance, the *Black Lotus* contacted me.

"Good work, Master."

"Yeah. I'm exhausted. Everything okay on your side?"

"Yes," Mei replied. "We suffered no damage. However, the other group claimed most of the pirate bounties."

"No helping that. Their ship's designed to hunt pirates."

"It was incredible," Elma chimed in. "Maybe I should install some stalker missiles on the *Antlion* too."

"Not a bad idea. That'd increase your ammunition expenses quite a bit, though."

A stalker missile cost about the same amount as a seeker missile, but since each individual stalker missile was relatively weak, you had to shoot a lot of them. They were definitely easier to use, but once you factored in the costs…

"So how's our progress?" I asked.

"We are bombarding the vital parts of the base one at a time, aside from the main generator," Mei answered. "It should not be long before we take them all down."

"Okay. Keep it up."

The *Black Lotus*'s nose emitted a ferocious flash; an explosion in the pirates' base followed. What were we doing, you ask? We were reducing their numbers through artillery bombardment.

Essentially, to make it safer to salvage the goods the pirates had stashed, we would first riddle the base with holes so it was no longer airtight. It goes without saying, but to survive, normal humans and humanoid beings required pressurized spaces properly optimized for breathing. There were apparently a few races that could survive in outer space just fine, but they were extremely rare. Thrown into outer space without protective gear, people generally died within a minute. The same thing befell people inside a structure in outer space that ceased to be airtight.

Humane treatment? Never heard of it.

Well, it wasn't that I didn't understand where that concept came from. As someone born in modern Japan, I didn't have zero misgivings about this. But mercy wasn't going to save me from lethal lasers. I valued my own life, and my crew's lives, over those of pirates and their potential victims—who might not even exist.

"Good work," Celestia told me. "Those were some nice dance moves."

"Yeah, thanks. Everything good?"

"I'm barely breaking even on my ammunition costs. Running a business with thin profit margins but high expenses is tough."

The image of her smirking face rose unbidden in my mind. It was true that she had likely spent an arm and a leg on ammo, but we'd just destroyed a pirate base. And in addition to the usual bounties, we'd also earn a subjugation bonus. So this job hardly had "thin profit margins"—not that I was going to argue with her. I'd be taking 70 percent of the sale profits earned from the materials we salvaged from the base. When all was said and done, we'd both probably walk away having earned about the same amount off our spoils.

"I'm going to take a break while we wait for her to finish mopping up," Celestia told me. "You guys know where the storage area is, right?"

"Mei never makes mistakes. Don't worry."

"Okay, then. I'll contact you once we're ready to go. Then it'll be your turn to take a break."

"Got it," I agreed.

It seemed that Celestia didn't want us to drop our guard completely yet. We'd removed all the pirates' potential methods of resistance, but it was still possible that new pirates unaware that their base had been destroyed would show up. Therefore, relaxing too early was risky.

"The job isn't over until we return to the colony," I told the others. "Stay focused, and let's go."

"Understood!"

"Yes, my lord."

It was good to see that Kugi was back to her normal self. And, now that I thought about it, Mimi had kept calm the entire time. She must've gotten used to this. It was about time to think about raising

her percentage of the profits from the spoils—starting with those from this job.

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Thanks to the *Black Lotus*'s bombardment, holes now literally riddled the pirate base. We'd pretty much subjugated the base—or at least cleaned it out. The only two locations we hadn't bombarded were the storage area and the generators. A few smarter pirates might've gathered in those spots, realizing that we probably wouldn't bombard them—after all, if we'd happened to hit the generator, it could've blown up the entire base. After escaping there, though, they were trapped like rats with nowhere to go. Left with no other options, those pirates could be planning to turn the tables through close combat. They could indeed do so if they successfully took out whoever was assaulting their base that way.

"Assault pod launched."

"Okay. Now we just have to wait."

Knowing that, there was no reason for us to head there in person and fall into their trap. We had plenty of excellent combat bots, so all we had to do was launch an assault pod that could crash through the base's outer wall and deliver them. Rather than a careful breach by humans, any surviving pirates would instead have to deal with a swarm of combat bots charging them while their refuge depressurized. A true nightmare for them.

"You don't look too happy, Kugi."

"No…It's just… Was there no other way to go about this?"

"Well, they were space pirates, in the end. I guess there *might* be some good pirates among them, but…"

Although there could be individuals among our enemies whom we could communicate with, they were ultimately still space pirates. I had no interest in befriending guys who processed and sold other humans. You tended to lose sympathy for them when you came

across victims who'd been drugged and shipped with their limbs cut off. That was just some of the lighter stuff; I hesitated to put their more serious crimes into words.

When you looted spoils of war from pirates, though, it was best not to eat any food that wasn't properly labeled. And if someone asked you to try something, it was best to refuse. Pirates didn't shy away from a certain taboo.

"It's better to think of pirates as a different species who happen to be human-shaped," I advised.

"Is that so…?"

Kugi really was a sheltered girl. If she was going to stick with me, a mercenary, she'd have to get used to this. Pirates were evil, and evildoers didn't deserve her pity. I supposed that was just an excuse I made so that I wouldn't think about this, but if there was a problem with that, it was up to the emperor to solve—not me. It wasn't an issue a single mercenary could fix.

"Master," Mei reported, "the combat bots have finished sweeping the storage area."

"Got it. The Krishna will stay on guard, so work with our allies to start choosing and collecting our spoils from this battle."

"Yes, Master. Should I contact the military?"

"Yeah. It'll probably take some effort, but make sure to do that."

"Leave it to me, Master."

Mei's transmission ended. She was as capable as ever, making life a lot easier for me.

"Let's send out our recovery drones and give the *Black Lotus* permission to control them."

"Got it!"

"Yes, my lord."

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As we stood ready on the *Krishna*, logs detailing spoils the *Black Lotus* and the *Antlion* had recovered streamed in one after another. The most conspicuous loot was definitely the cutting-edge technology.

"Cutting-edge technology" was a pretty broad category, but to be more precise, we recovered materials used to produce nanomachines, chemical goods used to make drugs, laser-resistant plating material, specialized alloys used to create specific fibers, and small positron brains like Mei's. All those products fetched high prices, so we could definitely look forward to the profits from selling them.

"Oh, right—Mimi, I'm bumping up your share of the profits. You're getting a raise."

"Huh?! N-no, you really don't have to… I can't even spend the money you already pay me."

"Based on the work you're doing, I need to increase your pay," I insisted. "When we return to the colony and start selling this stuff, let's go over to the mercenary guild and revise your rate. It's about time, I think."

Every system's calendar was different, and there was no daytime or nighttime in space. Also, since we traveled between systems using hyperdrive, tracking the passage of time was difficult. But a year had passed since I'd accepted Mimi aboard my ship. Probably. *At least, I think it has…*

"Really…? But…Master Hiro…we're…husband and wife, right? Technically?"

"That's not something I usually think about. But now that you mention it, yeah, we are."

"Grr…" Mimi puffed up her cheeks.

No, don't misunderstand. You look cute like that, but please don't get mad! "I mean, we've always gotten along really well, even before we technically got married, right? Look, we're getting sidetracked. What were you trying to say?"

"Grr… I was just wondering…whether our marriage would affect how dividing the spoils worked."

"I see. That makes sense. Is it normal for a married couple to have a joint account in the Empire?"

"Hm? I'm not sure. I never heard my mom or dad mention anything like that. Do you know anything about it, Kugi?"

"I'm not familiar with such customs in the Empire. Actually, I'm not even sure how it's done back home."

So Kugi also hadn't heard of such practices. It seemed like it would be best to get that matter clarified when possible. *When it comes to common-sense questions like this, who should I ask? Elma, as usual? Maybe Dr. Shouko? Hmm… Neither of those options feels right.*

In times of trouble, I decided, I should rely on the mercenary guild. Once we got back to Arein Tertius, it would be time to pay them a visit.

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We finished collecting our spoils without incident, and it didn't take long for a patrol squad from the system army to arrive. They'd come to investigate the scene and collect materials the pirates had used to construct their base. The generators and building materials could be recycled and used on space stations or in colonies. We weren't taking that type of material—you needed a ship equipped with specialized demolition and construction facilities—so it was all theirs.

"Today's on me. Cheers!" cried Granny Celestia.

"Cheers!"

We were now back on Arein Tertius, where the granny was leading a toast in one of the colony's bars.

Why? "We haven't organized our spoils or maintained our ships yet, so how come we're already celebrating?"

"Really? Organizing and maintenance at a time like this? After you finish a job, you go out for drinks and a good meal! That should be common sense to you as a mercenary. You can deal with those quibbles later," Celestia told me, then gulped down her drink.

That's strong stuff she's guzzling. Can this granny handle it? "We do things our own way," I replied. "I can't hold my liquor, so I won't be having any."

"Mm—aah! Can't hold liquor? Yet you dare call yourself a mercenary?"

"I do. I don't like how alcohol tastes anyway."

"That's only because you never had the good stuff! You say you can't hold liquor, but that problem's solvable, ain't it?"

She had a point. I probably didn't like the taste of alcohol because, since I hadn't tried much to begin with, I'd never found a flavor I liked. But I wasn't really interested in passing out or dealing with a hangover just to discover that taste.

"Maybe, but I've never felt like going to extremes just to drink."

For instance, why would someone modify their body simply to be able to drink something they didn't even like the taste of? Such modifications were probably a breeze, given the level of this universe's technology, but still.

"You sure are a party pooper. Sheesh… I have no idea what she sees in you."

"I don't know myself. I value her highly, though."

"Guys have a soft spot for girls with big tits."

"Mimi does indeed have wonderful breasts, but that's not the only reason I value her."

I stopped there, since I had no interest in gossiping about love with this granny. A pure, hardworking girl like Mimi wasn't easy to come by. She was someone worth putting my life on the line for.

"Hmm? So you say, but you're not exactly a faithful man, from what I can see."

"I'm aware that I'm undeserving."

I really was trying to do my best in my own way, but some things just weren't in my control. It wasn't possible to bend the universe to our wishes.

"Well, that girl has the hots for you, so there's not much room for me to butt in. Even if I dragged her away, she'd find a way to come back to you."

"You think I'd even let you get away with that? Although, well…I guess if Mimi wanted to leave, then that'd be a different story."

Separating from Mimi—just the thought of that made my chest ache. Still, if Mimi herself desired that, I would want to respect her wishes. I'd probably pester her and try to get her to change her mind, but if she *insisted* on leaving… *Ugh. Just thinking about it makes me feel like I'm dying.*

"It seems you aren't just playing around with her, then. Fine. If you really *were* only toying with her feelings, I'd tear you apart and turn you into ashes with my laser gun."

"What the hell? You're a scary grandma…"

The chilling part was that I could picture Celestia actually doing it. There was zero chance of something like that happening, though; I wasn't smooth enough to pull it off.

"Honestly, things might've turned out all right in the end," Celestia mused. "It's unfortunate that Folto and Myna passed away, but now Mimi is freely traveling the universe. She lost her peaceful

life alongside her parents, but in exchange she received you, freedom, and an exciting lifestyle. Maybe the scales are balanced."

"I'm not sure about that, but I want to do my best for Mimi, so that she can hopefully feel that way."

"Good. You do that. But know that, if you make her cry, I'll be coming after you."

"I'll keep that in mind…"

I certainly didn't want to get into a real fight with this old lady. Mei had told me how Celestia had performed during the battle with the pirates. Her ship was actually quite intimidating. Assuming she really could make full use of those deflector shields, she'd prove an insanely tough foe.

Normal shields worked by covering a ship with multiple layers of protection from all angles, whereas deflector shields instead focused a powerful defensive layer in a specific direction. They were difficult to use, but if applied properly, they could provide a small ship with a surprisingly durable shield.

The *Krishna* often engaged in chaotic close-quarters fights, so deflector shields wouldn't really suit it. After all, in such chaotic battles, the enemy fired on you from all directions. Deflector shields were better for ships that maintained a certain distance when destroying enemies.

"There's something I wanted to ask," Celestia said.

"What?"

"When will I get to meet my great-grandchildren?"

"That matter is still under consideration. We're enjoying our lifestyle as mercenaries right now."

"Hm? Well, it's true that giving birth and raising a kid are a lot of work. Still, you've got a capable maid on hand, as well as a doctor and extensive medical facilities. So I'm guessing I won't have to wait long."

"No comment."

It was true that the *Black Lotus* had been renovated recently in part because I wanted to be prepared in case such a situation arose. Handling such matters was easier with proper medical facilities, rather than rudimentary medical pods. We could have Mei act as a babysitter, and I could always get additional Maidroids to serve as her subordinates if needed. Though we were busy when on the job, we also had a lot of free time while traveling, so I felt it'd be possible for us to handle a few kids.

We'd implemented upgrades at this point for Dr. Shouko's sake, but even if she hadn't joined us, I probably would've arranged for similar renovations in the near future. And I could always have ordered a Maidroid with specialized medical knowledge—a doctoroid or nurseroid?—installed to serve as a ship's doctor.

"Well, if you do end up having kids, send me a message. I'll come by to at least see their faces."

"If I feel like it, I will."

"Even if you don't, I'm sure Mimi will contact me."

Then why ask me? I really didn't know how to deal with this granny.

"Master Hiro… Celes… The food is ready!"

Mimi had appeared with perfect timing, since I really didn't want to talk to her granny for another second. *Truly* perfect timing. *The food is ready, eh? Probably more dishes suiting Mimi's unique palate. This is a good opportunity to get one over on that granny.*

"You heard her," I told Celestia. "Your cute granddaughter prepared a meal for you. Look forward to it."

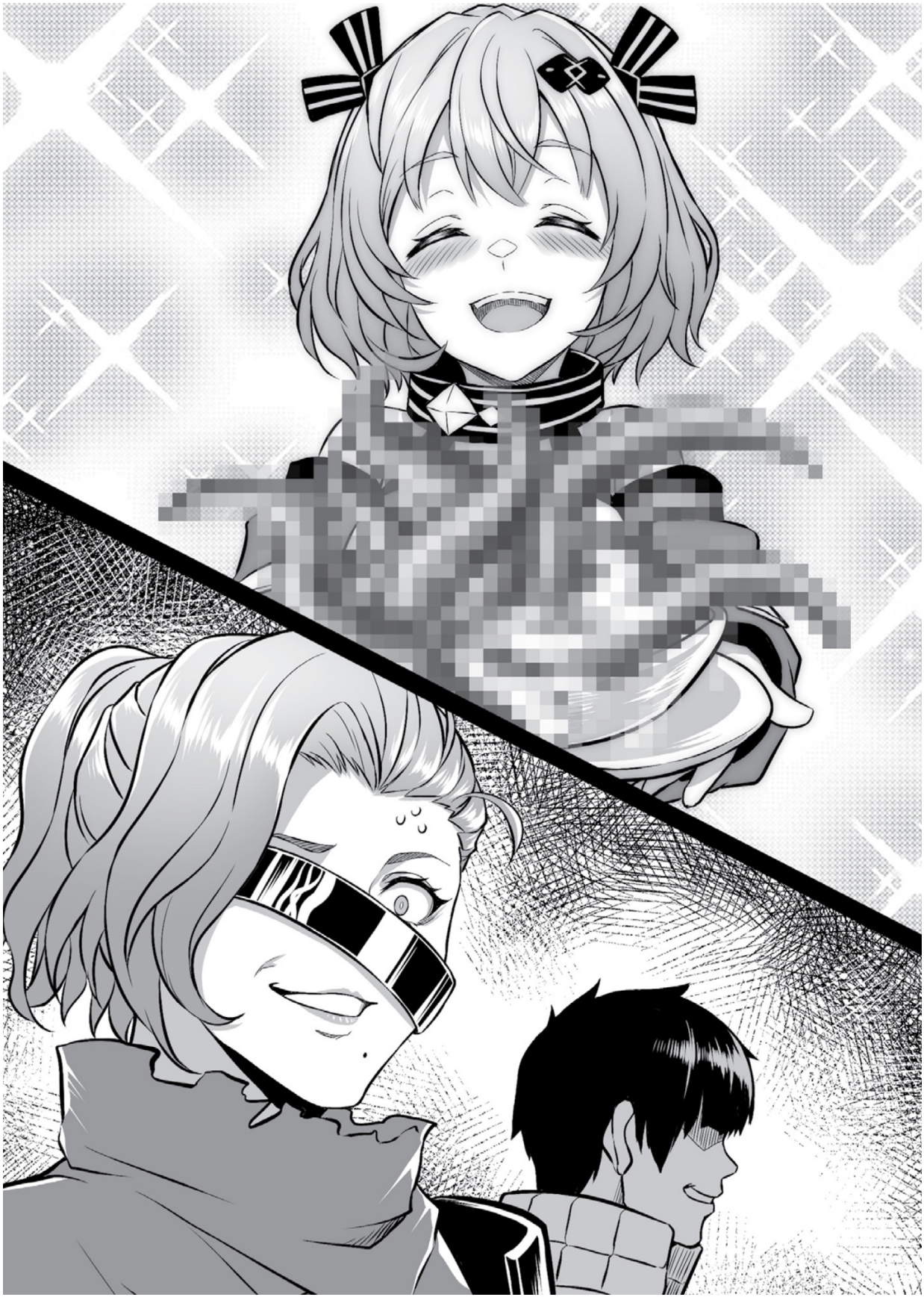
"Hm? What's with the weird expression? What're you scheming?"

"I'm not scheming anything. I'm just eager for something. Let's go."

Celestia had her guard up as I pushed her toward the table where Nicholas and Lattis already sat, their faces pale. My crew had already gotten used to Mimi's fare, but I doubted that could be true of this granny.

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"Don't think that you won..." the old lady snapped as she and her group unsteadily stumbled away.



"Well, you already lost," I retorted.

After cleaning up, we retired for the night.

The next day, my crew and I met again to discuss our plans now.

"I don't have any specific goal in mind at the moment," I explained, "so we can go wherever we want."

"You don't have any goal?" Dr. Shouko cocked her head.

Shaking my head, I replied, "Nope, nothing specific right now. Although, as mercenaries, hunting pirates or earning money through other means do drive most of our actions. We made quite a haul from the last operation—still, I'd like to earn more, if possible."

We'd spent quite a bit renovating the *Black Lotus*, so the money we'd made in the outermost region was gone just like that. We were simply making ends meet—not that we ever got so dangerously low on funds that we couldn't afford necessities.

"We *could* just wander around to random star systems looking for a lucrative opportunity," I mused.

"We could, but having a concrete direction would be better," Elma said.

"Yeah. This is hon we're talking about, though," Tina responded. "Even if we just wander aimlessly, I'm sure some mouthwaterin' meal of an opportunity will dish itself right up for us."

"Come on. We're being serious," Elma retorted. "Okay…I guess that *is* a serious take."

Let up on that joke already, will you? It's a sensitive subject. Don't treat trouble coming to find me as an established fact. I'll sue you for defamation.

Mimi raised her hand enthusiastically. "I wouldn't call this a plan, but I do have an idea!" It was rare for her to weigh in during a conversation involving business or how to make money.

"Okay, let's hear it," I said.

"All right! Well, it'd be a waste to sell the spoils we gained by destroying the pirate base right here in the Arein System."

"Oh, I see where you're going with this. That's true," Elma agreed.

Mm-hmm… That does make sense. Looking around the room, it seemed that Tina, Wiska, and Dr. Shouko also understood what Mimi suggesting. Only Kugi was lost.

"Basic market economics," I explained. "Our loot from the pirates mostly consists of products produced here in this system. So if we sell them here, they'll go for less than they would elsewhere. After all, since they're made here, they're already plentiful."

"I see… It would be like trying to sell meat to a butcher. They'll only buy it cheaply, so it would be better to sell it to a restaurant or family," Kugi said.

"Well, yeah. Something like that." *Why'd she use meat to make her analogy? I guess she must* really *like meat.*

For the record, I did end up taking Kugi to the cultured meat plant. She must have been resistant to nausea or something, because surprisingly enough, she didn't show the slightest queasiness. She really was mentally strong. On the other hand, watching the process again still made *me* nauseous, although I'd known what would happen. Unfortunately, I'd failed to drag other victims along with the two of us. *Damn it.*

"Have you got a destination in mind?" I asked Mimi.

"Yes! It's a place I learned about from my granny," she replied.

She activated the table's holo-display, and a galaxy map presented itself before us.

"It's a bit far away," Mimi continued, "but people seem to think that a pandemic will break out in this star system over here. If we head there now, the pandemic may already have begun by the time we arrive."

She was pointing to a region more than ten hyperlanes away. I didn't see any gateways near it either; if we headed there, we'd have to do so gradually, hyperlane by hyperlane.

"A pandemic? Wouldn't going there be dangerous?"

"Pandemic" was a broad term, and without further details about the situation, it'd be best to steer clear. If it was something like influenza, then catching it would be uncomfortable, but young, energetic people weren't likely to die from it; thus, we'd be okay to head over. If it was some fatal, unknown virus or bacteria, though, then going there would be a mistake.

"This ship's crew, myself included, are up to date on their infectious disease vaccines, so I think it'd be all right to go there," Dr. Shouko chimed in. "Even if it's a new pathogen existing vaccines can't handle, we can greatly reduce our likelihood of becoming infected so long as we take preventative measures."

"That may be true, but…"

Spaceships were contained environments with means of preventing viruses and bacteria from getting inside. That was what airlocks and sterilizing rooms were for. Some ships even had high-grade sensors that detected increases in the concentration of airborne viruses or bacteria. If someone became infected, such sensors could detect that something was wrong before that person developed symptoms and realized themselves that they were ill.

We could also prepare hazmat suits for everyone to be ready for a worst-case scenario. Anyway, another reason I'd gone ahead and added an entire medical area to the *Black Lotus* was to accommodate any crew members who got sick.

"Hmm… Well, I guess it could be a good opportunity to test our new facilities," I mused.

"Yeah. It would also prove to the mercenary guild that we can operate safely in such regions," Elma noted.

"Saving people afflicted by disease is a way to accumulate virtue," Kugi declared.

Elma had analyzed the merits of Mimi's idea from a mercenary's point of view, while Kugi… I wasn't sure *what* point of view Kugi's comment had come from. I wasn't exactly a monk. Still, she was right that helping people was a good thing, although I'd still charge them for my services.

"Okay, then. Let's go with that idea," I agreed. "We actually *won't* sell loot here. We'll get in touch with the granny and tell her we want priority on medical goods when splitting the spoils. And while we have the opportunity, let's stock up on as many medical supplies and devices as possible. Even if it turns out there isn't a pandemic going on in that system, these types of goods are always in demand, so it's not likely that stuff will end up dead weight."

"True. Medical goods really do fly off the shelves," Dr. Shouko said. "I'll help Mimi choose what supplies to bring with us."

"Thanks. Tina, Wiska, consult Dr. Shouko about what preparations we'll need to make to protect ourselves against infection. And check our airlock, sterilizing room, and hazmat suits."

"Roger that!" Tina replied.

"Understood," Wiska said.

That left just me, Elma, and Kugi.

"We'll take charge of discussing things with the granny and picking up our rewards from the mercenary guild and this star system's military base," I declared. "We'll also need to work out Dr. Shouko's and Mimi's share of the spoils."

"Ah…okay," Mimi said with a conflicted expression.

"Treat me nicely!" Dr. Shouko said with a smile and wave.

Truly contrasting reactions. Given my relationship with Mimi, I really wasn't sure what the appropriate distribution would be. I'd have to provide details and ask over at the guild.

“That’s everyone,” I said. “Let’s get to work.”

“Aye aye, sir,” my crew chimed as one.

Epilogue

OUR DISCUSSIONS WITH THE GRANNY went smoothly.

"I was the one who told Mimi about it, so I expected this to happen," Celestia said.

"I see."

"Either way, it's not like we're losing out."

Granny and her crew would receive nonmedical spoils, which they could then sell here in this system or in other systems as they pleased. In terms of bounties and ship takedown rewards, we stuck to our initial agreement, so there wasn't really cause for conflict. Then we sent the necessary documents to the mercenary guild, who should be able to figure the rest out for us.

Hm? I was just letting other people do all the work? Of course I was. Leaving this type of work to professionals was ideal. I was just a guy with a little skill piloting spaceships, so what'd you expect?

"We're heading over to the mercenary guild now. Take care."

"You too. We'll contact you if we encounter any big jobs."

"Please, nothing *too* big…"

I wasn't sure what Celestia's definition of "big job" was, but I couldn't help feeling like she'd ask me to help her burn down the hideouts of a huge enclave of space pirates using merely our combined forces. *Yikes.* I ended the transmission with a sigh.

Elma and Kugi, who'd finished preparing for departure, were staring at me.

"What?"

"Nothing in particular. It's just—when all's said and done, you really do work hard, don't you?" Elma said.

"I believe that is a wonderful trait, my lord."

"Why're you suddenly praising me out of nowhere…? I push as much work as possible onto other people."

"But you take care of jobs you can do yourself on your own. You could make Mei or me do them instead," Elma said.

"Isn't that normal?"

"Yeah, yeah… Of course. Let's head over to the mercenary guild."

"Huh? What's with that reaction…?"

Elma was in a good mood, and she and Kugi each grabbed one of my arms, dragging me along. I wasn't a blockhead who couldn't read others' intentions, but I really couldn't figure out why they'd reacted this way. If something this small was enough to label me hardworking, then just how lazy was this universe's average mercenary…?

I felt that was a question I'd rather not know the answer to. It was better to remain in the dark about some things.

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"I think my head's going to explode."

"Just get Mei to work it out instead."

When I brought up the matter of Mimi's share, it spiraled into a discussion about what percentage a mercenary's spouse received, as well as the typical salary for a ship's doctor. Now I felt like my brain was overheating.

Elma must've felt the same way, given her wry expression. Meanwhile, Kugi had no idea what was going on; she currently looked like a baffled space cat. Discussions involving numbers were

always complicated—I could never keep up. Not even half of what I was being told was entering my brain.

A simple summary of the discussion was that, given Mimi's current skills, increasing her percentage by 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent was appropriate, and an appropriate salary for Dr. Shouko—in light of her skills and qualifications—was twenty to thirty thousand Ener in base monthly pay, plus an appropriate bonus whenever her skills as a doctor or researcher provided extra value.

"Hmm…isn't Dr. Shouko's cut a little too low?" Elma asked.

"I'll just have to make up the difference through bonuses."

"That could add up to thirty to forty thousand Ener a month. That would count as extremely high pay, wouldn't it...? Or is that amount merely insignificant to platinum-rankers?" The mercenary-guild receptionist stared at me in disbelief.

I guess it isn't a small sum. Still, if you compare it to how much the rest of the crew earns… Well, I guess it's not like my wealth's overflowing at the moment. And I suppose base pay of twenty to thirty thousand Ener isn't bad at all.

In terms of spouses sharing finances, even when we consulted standard imperial law regarding a marriage between a mercenary and one of their crew members, our situation seemed to be a bit of a special case. At that point, the guild worker went into a lengthy spiel that sounded like a sutra or incantation or something. All I really picked up from it was that, for now, as long as we kept operating as mercenaries, we should separate our finances, and I should be sure to pay Mimi as well. I could hold off on filling out forms regarding the legal division of property until she decided to leave the mercenary lifestyle to focus on childrearing instead. At least, that was what I got out of what was said.

"To be honest, mercenaries tend to carelessly spread their seed before eventually dying somewhere," the guild worker told me.

"Ouch…"

"And they typically do so in passing, since they tend to wander from system to system," she added. "The way you bring them all along with you is respectable, Captain Hiro. Very respectable."

The woman's lips were smiling, but her eyes weren't. Even if you left out Mei, since she was a Maidroid, there was Mimi, Elma, Tina, Wiska, Kugi, and Dr. Shouko—that made six women in total whom I brought around with me, which definitely *was* a little questionable. I was self-aware enough to understand that point; still, it really wasn't my fault. *Complex circumstances deeper than the sea led things to end up this way, so please, let me off easy.*

"Setting aside the *number* of women he has with him, he's generally quite faithful, so don't worry about us," Elma interjected. "And he doesn't drink or frequent brothels like most mercenaries. He doesn't have any weird drug dependencies either."

"My lord is a very kind man."

"Oh my…"

I really wished the guild employee would stop glaring at me as if I were some philanderer. This wasn't my fault, and it wasn't like she had a right to criticize me.

She cleared her throat. "Regarding the rewards for the pirates and pirate base your group recently crushed—this number being the total sum, including the base materials' value—we calculated that your share comes out to 23,060,000 Ener."

"I see," I said. "Well, that base was pretty small."

"Yeah. The asteroid made up most of its mass, after all," Elma agreed.

"But didn't we just make a lot of money?" Kugi asked.

"I guess so," Elma said.

"Yeah, I guess it wasn't bad," I said.

Looking at the breakdown, the largest percentage was our reward for destroying the base, followed by what we were making

for the base materials. Then, finally, there were our profits from bounties and materials salvaged from the pirate vessels we'd taken down. We still needed to sell the loot we'd plundered, so our total earnings from destroying the base would probably come out to slightly over thirty million Ener. We had yet to convert that plundered loot to cash, though, since we planned to take it elsewhere to sell it. Depending on the situation at our destination, we could earn even more than I predicted.

"We just received an inquiry from the Arein System authorities," the guild worker told me. "Just to confirm, you wish to purchase a large quantity of advanced medical supplies, correct?"

"Oh, yeah. We figured that selling the goods we retrieved elsewhere would be more profitable than offloading them here. We found a lot of medical materials, so we decided we might as well fill up with more before heading to where we want to sell them. Wait… Why would the authorities send *you* an inquiry about that?"

"Most likely because you've requested advanced medical supplies rather than normal ones. Sales of such supplies are heavily regulated, since they can be used to create dangerous addictive drugs. A professional license is required to purchase some such materials… But as someone in your crew has such a license, that isn't a problem for you, Captain Hiro."

"Ah—Dr. Shouko. Come to think of it, there's a small manufacturing setup in her lab."

Since someone in my crew had the materials, facilities, and expertise necessary, we could've become drug dealers producing dangerous substances if we'd wanted to. That was why the authorities contacted the mercenary guild and asked them to confirm whether it was really okay to sell us those items.

"If you abuse your position and the trust that accompanies a platinum rank to deal drugs, we will rescind that rank and place a dead-or-alive bounty on your head. Such actions would also be a grave criminal offense under imperial law."

"Hey, I have a reputation as a good guy, don't I?" I protested. "Don't worry. That's a dangerous way to make money; I can earn plenty without resorting to such methods."

"Indeed," the guild worker said with a smile. "As a representative of the mercenary guild, I also wished to tell them not to patronize one of our platinum-rankers."

Oh, I know that smile. That's a "So if you know what's good for you, don't you dare do anything that besmirches our platinum rank's reputation" smile. Got it. "I'll let you handle communications with them," I told her. "For now, direct my reward to my account."

I decided to let Mei handle distributing it. She was good with numbers.

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"It seems like I caused you some trouble. Sorry about that," Dr. Shouko apologized.

Mimi did likewise. "Sorry…"

They were apologetic because I'd told them about the inquiry the mercenary guild had received. I didn't think that warranted an apology from them, though.

"It's not your fault. Under the circumstances, it's normal that they'd cover their bases. Similar things will probably happen in the future too. Just make sure to keep me in the loop. This time, I happened to learn about this immediately because I dropped by the mercenary guild."

It was only right for the guild to be careful, since our crew included a doctor with medical knowledge and the means to produce dangerous substances. And we were mercenaries, not merchants dealing with such substances frequently, so it was normal for them to have suspicions. A license like Dr. Shouko's was supposed to help you avoid jumping through hoops, but our situation was probably unusual enough to have the opposite effect.

"As long as we make a bundle in the end, it doesn't matter whether we need to deal with a few bumps on the road. What we're trying to do may also save lives."

I made a living through violence, and I wasn't trying to compensate for that with good deeds or anything. Still, I did think that being able to help people while earning money at the same time would be a nice bonus. Dealing with a little red tape was a small price to pay.

I paid the bills by killing pirates to begin with—an action that saved ordinary people's lives. I wasn't doing anything bad that I needed to make amends for, so I'd definitely be earning positive karma!

Hmm? Pirates are people too? Say that after you see what's left of their victims after pirates have chopped their limbs off and crushed and processed their insides with some chemical manufacturing device. That's just for starters, since pirates are very economical with their victims' body parts!

"Yeah, I'm technically a doctor, so I'm on board with doing anything that reduces the number of people suffering from injury and disease," said Dr. Shouko.

"Still, after all is said and done, we're a for-profit mercenary group," I said. "We don't work for free."

"Of course not. I don't intend to cheat myself either. Leave charity to those self-important nobles."

"Hiro is technically an honorary imperial viscount," Elma pointed out.

"Now that you mention it, that award *did* come with an honorary viscount title as well as a small yearly stipend…" I confirmed. "But it's not like I own any land or anything. Still, there's no reason for me to bestow charity on some other unknown noble's citizens. We'll just avoid ripping them off; that policy's good enough for now."

Elma's reminder had made me recall those rewards. *How much is my stipend, anyway? I should have Mei check later. It's honestly so small that I completely forgot about it.* "So, um… Right. Dr. Shouko, you can apparently make dangerous substances or something?"

"Technically, yeah. Are you interested in that kind of stuff?"

"No. I just thought I should know, as captain. We obviously can't make and sell those kinds of things to other people, and in general, you're also not allowed to make them for our own private use. If you really have to dabble in that stuff for a medical reason, then you're allowed to do so without my permission, but at least report it to me afterward. I'll let you manage yourself beyond that."

"Okay. Can Mei help me with that management?"

"Good idea. Mei, do you mind?"

Mei's voice sounded from the cafeteria speaker. "No, Master. Leave it to me."

If both Mei and Dr. Shouko were going to manage anything drug related, I shouldn't have to worry.

"Still, what exactly counts as a 'dangerous substance'?" asked Dr. Shouko. "That's a pretty broad term."

"I'll leave that to your discretion. If you're worried, you can always discuss the matter with Mei. It would be dumb for a layman like me to tie the hands of someone with specialized knowledge. You can just report to me about anything you feel you need to."

"Ha ha… You're putting quite a lot of trust on my shoulders," Dr. Shouko replied, smiling awkwardly. "I'll do my best to live up to that."

I sensed someone's eyes drilling a hole through my back, so I turned to face Tina. She had a *"What about me? What about me?"* expression, so I nodded. *Yeah, you and Wiska are our other shipboard specialists. I put just as much trust in you two as I do in Dr. Shouko.*

"Once we load the cargo, are we done with the Arein System?"

"Yeah. Mimi, want to check in with your grandma before we leave?"

"No need!" Mimi showed me her tablet. "We had a chance to talk already, and we've exchanged contact information."

I see. They have each other's contact info now. Given how vast the galaxy was, electronic messages could take days or even months to arrive, but they'd do so eventually. Having a way to contact each other was probably reassuring to the pair.

I myself had exchanged contact info with some people I'd met in my travels. For example, Chris. We messaged each other about as often as people would send each other letters. Sometimes I also received messages from Colonel Serena, complaining about her job, and from time to time the media staff we'd allowed aboard in the past also contacted me. Not often, though.

"Okay, then. Dr. Shouko…"

"I'm fine. When I left the company, we said our goodbyes, and we've long had each other's contact information."

"I see. Okay, then. Let's set off as soon as we're done loading."

"Whooo! Oh yeah, hon—where exactly are we going?"

"Oh, I haven't mentioned the system name yet, huh? Our next destination's the Rimei System. According to Mimi's grandmother, there are whispers that a pandemic's going to break out because of a new virus."

Tina suddenly rose, shouting, "The *Rimei* System?!"

Huh? Is there a problem? "Do you have some sort of connection with that place?"

"Well…yeah, I guess." She didn't seem to want to talk about it.

I looked over at Wiska, but she evidently didn't want to say anything either.

"Looks like you two both have some connection with our destination. I won't force you to tell us, but I'd rather not switch destinations at this point."

We could sell medical goods wherever we wanted, so we could always unload what we'd gathered bit by bit, but offloading it all in a system desperate for such supplies would be far more efficient. Unless there were serious circumstances making the twins unwilling to go to Rimei, I didn't want to change our plans.

"Yeah…we have a connection to it. But it'd be unreasonable to force you to change course because of our circumstances, so don't worry about it, hon."

"All right, then. What do you think, Wiska?"

"If Sis is fine with it… Sis?"

"I guess I should just tell you," Tina said uncomfortably. "It ain't really that big a deal, but I used to live there. Till I reunited with Wiska and left, at least."

She used to live there? Live there… Right. I remember Tina mentioning that—before reuniting with Wiska—she ran with the wrong crowd in some colony somewhere. She cut those ties after meeting Wiska again and braved numerous dangerous situations to escape to the Vlad System.

"…I smell trouble." I said.

"Yeah… Sorry, hon."

"It's fine," I reassured Tina. She seemed quite down, but it was practically predetermined that I'd have to deal with problems no matter where I went anyway.

"Nobody here seems particularly surprised," Dr. Shouko noted.

"Ah ha ha…" Mimi chuckled. "Well, this always happens, after all."

She was right; this really was nothing unusual, so it wasn't really a problem.

"It's *always* like this?" Dr. Shouko asked.

"I haven't been here long myself," Kugi responded. "But so far, in my experience, yes."

"I see. Well… Hopefully nothing bad happens."

Just so you know, Dr. Shouko, if it does, it'll affect you as well. You won't escape. Kugi already seems to have given up on avoiding disaster too. But I suppose being highly adaptable is a good thing.

"That's just how it is," I said. "Mei, make sure to cover for me if I need help."

"Leave it to me, Master. I will ensure that our combat bots are ready to deploy at all times."

Reliable but violent. Hopefully she wouldn't have to use them.

Afterword

THANKS FOR PICKING UP this volume of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! We're already on the thirteenth. Just how far will we continue…? I'd like to go as far as possible!

It's summertime, and it feels like the temperature rises by the day. Last year was hot, and this year's no different. Please be careful to avoid heat stroke, everyone! AC is truly one of the great conveniences human civilization has created. Denizens of Hokkaido, like me, begin to melt when the temperature rises above 25 degrees Celsius, so AC is truly a lifesaver.

I've managed to play all kinds of games recently. For example, a game where the story centers on a conflict over a unicorn ring, one where you become a wandering samurai in the final years of the Edo period, one where you play as a half-machine, half-human beauty who stylishly swordfights monsters, and a survival game set in a post-apocalyptic world in which your goal is to revive civilization… Wow, I've *really* gamed a lot recently. I'd also like to enjoy the shadows of an Erdtree, but I'm currently obsessed with a shark maid… A curt, slovenly, depressive one. I wish I had a maid who'd say "Welcome back, Master" to me in a monotone.

I can go on and on about games, so let's stop here before it's too late. I really have a lot more I'd like to say, but I must control myself!

So about this volume's cover… Bunny girls, huh?! Granny's there too. Hmm? Putting aside Granny, why bunny girls? Just so you know, there are authors out there who edit their work to sate their lust for bunny girls. Me, for example.

The Verthalz Holy Empire has started doing things it didn't in the web version. It seems the rapid speed of the story, and Hiro

awakening to his psionic powers, are changing this universe's direction.

Let's talk about the various weapons combat ships are equipped with. Most galactic empires, including the Grakkan Empire, employ directed-energy weapons. As the name suggests, these weapons direct energy at the speed of light. When it comes to speed, range, accuracy, long-term usability, and shield damage, directed-energy weapons boast an effective, well-balanced performance. On the flip side, they're somewhat lacking in firepower.

Combat ships also employ projectile weapons. Compared to directed-energy weapons, projectile weapons are much slower and tend to have less range. Ammo is also a concern with those, making them less suited to extended fights. As such, they're less popular. But projectile weapons require less energy to operate, making them easier to employ than directed-energy weapons on ships with limited generator output.

Explosive weapons like seeker missiles have the same disadvantage as projectile weapons when it comes to speed. However, most have a tracking feature that locks on to enemy ships. They can seriously damage shields and ships themselves, making them second only to directed-energy weapons in popularity. But certain explosive weapons, like reactive anti-ship torpedoes, are a bit difficult to use.

Some ships also use plasma cannons. They shoot even more slowly than projectile weapons do, but they're capable of dealing heavy damage to shields, plating, and ships themselves. Plasma accelerators—particle-beam cannons that accelerate electrically charged baryons at near light speed to destroy their target—are an improved version of plasma cannons. There are also disruptors, a special weapon that bypasses shields and plating. They disintegrate the things they strike.

I plan to introduce other weapon types as well… I'm not sure whether they'll show up yet, though!

For the record, the Soul Crush weapon Verthalz uses in this volume doesn't cause detectable material damage. However, it's capable of bypassing shields and plating to directly affect living targets within a ship. Striking life-forms with this weapon destroys their minds and life force, killing them. Targeting a manned ship with Soul Crush would cause all the personnel aboard to die while the ship itself continued to operate as if nothing happened. It's truly a terrifying weapon.

Time to take my leave once again.

Thank you to my manager, K; our illustrator, Tetsuhiro Nabeshima; and everyone involved in this book's publication. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this book. Next up is the fourteenth volume! I hope we make it there!

About the Author

Ryuto

A BROWN BEAR LIVING IN HOKKAIDO.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.



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