

HACKER FILES: MOON PRINCESS

BY

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Synopsis

[Try not to fail] On KTS Kanopos, people are separated into those who are part of the Clans and those who are Clanless. Here on this massive battleship, there is nothing more important than becoming a Pilot for the Jade Empire. And as Helian Aeliana, heir to the infamous Guild, is finding out, it doesn't matter how smart, clever, or hard working you are. If you're not from the Clans, then your destined for a life as a Tech. But with lofty dreams of becoming a Pilot to rival the Moon Princess, she has every reason to believe she'll have to fall back on the family business.

The infamous prankster, Hēidòng Haruto, doesn't know there's any life outside of being a Pilot. He doesn't care if he's got the lowest scores in KANP either, he'll become a Pilot even if he has to make his own ZenKZ. But that won't get him into the ever elusive OCI program. And without it he'll forever be without his best friend, who just happens to be the heir to the most powerful Clan on Kanopos.

Together, Aeliana and Haruto, two unlikely friends, have to find a way

to beat the odds. And if worst comes to worst, cheat. Now, if only Kanopos would stay together long enough for either of them to achieve their goals, because for them failure isn't an option.

Part I

The Ghost Hacker

— 1 —

Boom!

“Star dust!” Haruto cursed as he pushed away his VECD screen. The clean chamber filling with dark smoke every passing second. “No, no, no, no, *no!*” He chanted as he leaped across the workbench. Grabbing the edge of the metal vacuum valve, he ignored the searing pain as he flipped it open. The low rumble of the motor powered vacuum sounded moments after causing the smoke to pour out from the VECD chamber and into his face.

“Cough. Cough.” Haruto choked as he pulled back from the growing cloud of putrid smoke.

Buzz. Buzz.

Haruto looked down at his vibrating BISM as a warning message appeared on the screen.

Injury detected! Injury detected! Please, stop current activity.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he mocked the generic message as he flicked the screen off. “I’m stopping. I’m stopping.” He continued under his breath. Really he ought to figure out how to disable the warnings altogether. He

knew he was injured, he hardly needed his guidance chip to tell him that! If the damned thing would actually heal him without all the fuss. Now that would be helpful, *useful* even.

Moving to activate his own first aid program, Haruto didn't get very far before the sound of loud high-pitched beeping goes off.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Letting out a great sigh as the smoke detector began to wail, he turned his head upwards. '*The Gods must be laughing at me today. I'm sure of it.*' He thought as he climbed onto his good chair. Blissful, wonderful silence greeted him as he disconnected the power. He'd have to remember to turn the damned thing back on, but that was for another time.

Collapsing into the chair a wave of pain hit him. His burn throbbed an angry reminder to activate his first aid program. The burn relief protocol top of the list.

"Hhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaahhh." Haruto sighed in relief, his eyes fluttering shut as the pain meds took effect. After a moment more, he let out a reluctant groan. This was the thirteen burn this week. There was no way he wasn't running on 'E'. A quick glance at his BISM screen confirmed his initial assessment. Burn, cuts, and bruises were all low. Dangerously so. Although radiation looked good.

'See, a plus side to everything.' He thought to himself. Although, the Healers were hardly going to welcome him with open arms for another refill. He'd been warned not to show up for another two more weeks. The regular

check-up time for radiation refills. ‘*Yeah, they’re going to be sooo happy to see me.*’ He thought sarcastically.

His mind’s eyes already picturing their pinched faces. He wasn’t sure why they weren’t on first name bases yet. They probably saw more of him than any other fourth year student. Haruto smiled at the thought, he really should consider stocking up properly. Seo-Jun hardly needed all of his. One too large inhalation turned into a coughing fit as smoke filled his lungs.

‘*Right smoke still everywhere.*’ He thought as he pushed himself out of his seat to the window. Throwing it open, he stuck his head outside and took a deep breath of smoke-free air.

With a long sigh he rested his head on the window seal looking out over Solas. There really was no better view.

The noise from the central plaza filtered up even here at Haruto’s apartment on the edge of Solas. People packed the streets. The occasional android among them. Overhead, was nearly as busy. Not like it used to be, but still droids zipping here and there. Tilting his head upward, Haruto caught sight of a patchwork robot, working on the catwalks. And just to the right, was the observatory deck. Currently open, giving Haruto a view of stars for miles.

KTS Kanopos was by far the best God Chaser class ship out there. Bar none. And Solas, his city, was the gem of the Jade Empire.

‘*And I’ve got the best view of it all.*’ He thought as his eyes turned back to the observatory and the millions of stars. ‘*Well, maybe not the best view.*’

He continued in thought. After all, his best friend's room lay right under the observatory deck. While she couldn't see Solas like he could, he could see the stars much clearer than anyone else. Assuming she wasn't stuck listening to a bunch of old farts.

Buzz. Buzz.

"Speaking of friends," Haruto muttered to himself as he looked down at his BISM to see the waiting message.

MPrincess: Distract me please.

Haruto smiled widely as he began typing back.

GhostHacker: It's 1413. That's class time.

MPrincess: There's a 66% chance your not even there. Add in your current AIM project and that turns to 98%. We both know you get kicked out of class at a significantly higher rate when you're thinking of something else.

GhostHacker: That's because no one needs to know about the history of some outdated battle.

MPrincess: The Battle of Teckon cemented the power dynamics of the Jade Empire today.

GhostHacker: Blab, blab, blab, blab...

Haruto knew his best friend was holding back a sigh. His grin widened as he stepped back inside his apartment.

MPrincess: This is only mildly more entertaining than my tutors, Haru.

GhostHacker: I was just pulling your SKIM. Class or no class, you're way more interesting. Besides, I need a break.

There was short pause. Haruto stressed at the thought of the total meltdown sitting in his VECD. Completely unsalvageable.

Buzz. Buzz.

MPrincess: You'll get it soon.

He didn't know how she knew. But it was mildly comforting nevertheless.

GhostHacker: Not if I blow through all of my CG16 chips. You know how hard it was to get the box.

MPrincess: Yes, and I know that the warehouse in the Zhùróng sector is currently on high alert. So, I wouldn't recommend going back.

GhostHacker: Why does the old man need to rotate threat level drills anyway?

MPrincess: We've been over this.

GhostHacker: So, doesn't mean I've got to like it.

MPrincess: Stop pouting. Besides, you shouldn't be seen in the Zhùróng sector anyway.

GhostHacker: I've got an arrest on sight just about in every sector,
Princess.

There was a long pause, where Haruto knew she was giving him the mental eye.

GhostHacker: Okay, okay, okay. So maybe the Zhùróng sector is a special case.

MPrincess: My Uncle is still fighting the backlash for that unique prank, Haru. *Special* case is not how I would put it.

GhostHacker: It's not my fault they can't take a joke.

MPrincess: It was funny. And really, they should have known better than to simulink all of their SKIMs like that.

GhostHacker: See! My point exactly. I did them a *favor*, exposing that weakness.

MPrincess: Yes, I'm sure that's how they saw the SKIM virus too.

Haruto could feel the sass even through his BISM. It was after all an old argument they'd had. He'd comment on how simulinks like that were for babies, and she'd counter that a virus was illegal no matter the intent behind it. But in the end, they'd agree that it was funny and as long as no one got hurt the Princess didn't need to turn him in to her Uncle. Which is how all of their pranking related arguments went.

GhostHacker: Anyway, I just don't see why Guardian Inugami can't just give me one of his beta AIMs?

MPrincess: Besides the fact that it's an act of treason?

GhostHacker: The old man wouldn't care *that* much.

MPrincess: No, but the Council would. And they're not exactly your biggest fans.

GhostHacker: No one would have to know. The Guardians have dozens of them just laying around.

MPrincess: And they also have a full medical unit too.

His friend didn't give him any time to counter.

MPrincess: They're beta AIMs for a reason, Haru.

GhostHacker: So is SB3-QB9, but you don't complain about that.

MPrincess: You know SB3-QB9 didn't make it out of beta testing because of health risks.

GhostHacker: Come on Princess, no one would be the wiser if one AIM went missing.

MPrincess: And how would you get past regular inspections? SB3-QB9 is 30 years old and thus unclassified. The same can not be said for the five models in Guardian beta testing.

Haruto sulked at his friend's rationale. Yes, he'd probably get in trouble for having the beta chip, but the old man would get him out of it. He always did. '*If only I knew where the Guardians' base of operations was...*'

he thought dejectedly. He'd have liberated a chip or two for himself without having to implicate Guardian Inugami. The Princess would be able to get behind that.

MPrincess: I'm not going to give you the location of the Guardians base of operations.

Haruto didn't have a response to that.

MPrincess: What's the real problem, Haru?

Haruto paused in his reply.

GhostHacker: I've only got two left, Princess.

MPrincess: The CG16's are meant for practice. They're expendable. And we both know you've been making progress.

GhostHacker: But, what if it's not enough? What if I can't do it?

MPrincess: Can't? The infamous Ghost Hacker can't do something?

GhostHacker: Those hacks were mostly software driven. Viruses, low-key patches. This is different.

There was a long pause. Long enough that Haruto thought he'd lost his friend to her tutors.

Buzz. Buzz.

MPrincess: Haru, if there's anyone who can challenge an AI like the SB3 series, then it's you.

MPrincess: You've proven time and time again, that you can do the impossible. And this is no different.

MPrincess: You're going to finish patching SB2-QB9. And use your unique skills to pass the OCI exam.

GhostHacker: Yeah, and somehow get a passing score for academic excellence. Right Princess?

Even Haruto didn't believe that last statement. OCI was a pipe dream and they both knew it. Without a unique AIM, he'd do poorly on the showcase too. And that didn't even touch on the exams.

Buzz. Buzz.

Haruto jumped slightly in his SKIM, the buzzing of his BISM catching him by surprise.

MPrincess: You can do anything, Haru.

GhostHacker: Thanks Princess.

MPrincess: I have to go. Try to eat something other than MINOS, please.

GhostHacker: No promises.

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Haruto carefully opened the next CG16 chip under his clean chamber. Switching over to his VECD system, he began the tedious work of damaging the chip.

His VECD was off by a couple of picometers, and eventually he'd given up trying to fix the calibration. '*But what can you expect from a toy?*' He thought bitterly. The VECD, or Vacuum Environment for Creative Design, was marketed for children ages 6 to 12. And as the Princess liked to point out, discontinued 25 years ago for sparking and alignment issues. But the latest models were out of their agreed upon price range for gifts, so he was stuck with it.

Sitting back, Haruto took a look at his work. Comparing the damage to the similarly broken SB3 model in his homemade anti-chamber. "Alright you piece of junk, now how am I going to fix you?"

The problem, really, was the on-board power. No matter how he approached the problem, the thing just blow up in his face. Even now, as he stared at the circuitry under the fine microscope of the VECD system, he just couldn't see a way of successfully fixing the dang thing without crossing

wires.

'I've got to disconnect the power, but how?' He thought as he eyed the on-board power supply. "Disconnect, and it blows." He muttered to himself. "So I've got to keep the power running." Haruto mull over the idea for a moment longer.

"A secondary source, maybe?" He said aloud. An idea sparked in his mind as he reached for the last CG16 chip. Opening it up in the clean chamber. He sat it next to its identical brother, and smiled.

Half an hour later he was carefully diverting the power from one chip to the other using a slapped together protoboard. With the power diverted from the damaged chip, Haruto began the process of bridging the copper wiring around the damage portion. A smile stuck on his face as he worked. Humming to himself, he started on the last bridge when his hand slipped just slightly to the VECD default alignment.

"Star du..." A spark followed closely by smoke cut his curse short as the duel-linked CG16 chips shorted together. "All that work..."

Sighing deeply. He cleaned up the mess. Still it *had* worked. '*Up until I messed up.*' He thought with a forlorn look at his almost success. Clapping his hands together he focus. "Right. I've got this." Punching the air for good measure he hopped in place as he pumped himself up for the next steps.

"All I've got to do is build a mock power supply similar to SB3 on a new protoboard to connect them, bridge the damaged portions. Hope they still

have redundancy. And not blow anything up.” He hopped up and down some more. “Yeah, no problem. No problem at all.”

Sitting back down he got back to work.

* * * * *

Hours later he sat back from his work. The light in his apartment had automatically turned on sometime while he’d been working. As he had it set to offset the fading light from KTS Kanopos, he wasn’t sure exactly what time it was, but that hardly mattered now. It was done. SB3-QB9 should be fixed now. The SKIM around his hands hardened as he reached for the patched up AIM. He’d noticed it did that whenever he touched a functioning AIM. Some line of code in his BISM programming probably. All it meant for him was that he didn’t need to remember to put on static free gloves.

It was small, all of them were. But this was the first time when he really considered its size. This thing was going to change his life. Holding back a sigh, he put the chip back down. It would be just his luck to get some small particle in it right before he put it in his body.

‘I guess it’s now or never, huh.’

Opening his BISM, he popped out the basic guidance chip in there. Model 000256 given to every child born on KTS Kanopos during his first breath year, and while it wasn’t an AIM it did keep him online and connected to Kanopos. *Safe*. He closed his eyes as he gently held it. He felt cold without it. He wasn’t sure if that was because he was now offline, his

BISM no longer monitoring the temperature of his SKIM, or some other reason. But he felt cold.

'For a fourteen year old chip, you don't look half as bad as I thought you would. Seeing how much I put you through.' He thought. And he had a lot of memories with this chip. He felt a little misty eyed, and immediately pushed the thoughts of the past away. He didn't know why he was being like this, he knew for a fact that all of the students from Clans in his class at KANP didn't have their 000256 guidance chip anymore. The Clans never kept their baby chips for long. Not to mention this was always going to happen. He was due for an upgrade in two years. Either the pilot AIM or the civilian guidance chip. And he didn't want either one, so this, *this* was bound to happen sooner or later.

'All of the Clans have their own models. Better models, and so will I.' Haruto thought as he gently placed his childhood guidance chip into the anti-static vacuum chamber that SB3-QB9 chip had been resting in hours before.

Picking up the SB3-QB9 chip again, he hesitated above his BISM.
'What's the worst that could happen if this goes wrong?' He thought.

"I could short circuit my BISM, and destroy it and possibly blow off my arm, which I guess isn't the worst thing in the universe." Haruto answered his question aloud, "Unless, I've crossed the wrong wire, then it could possibly overload my heart and kill me when it starts up."

He paused for a moment in thought, "Man that would suck." Popping

the chip in place he shrugged, “Oh well, you only live once,” he continued as he snapped the BISM closed and the power re-routed back into it.

Shutting his eyes tightly he tensed in anticipation.

Buzz, buzz, buzzzzzz!

Haruto’s arm vibrated as he looked down at his BISM screen coming back online.

Hello Cadet Hēidòng Haruto.

My name is SB3-QB9.

The words flashed across his screen in simple characters just long enough for him to read.

I will be connecting to your Bio-Interactive System Monitor now.

Haruto felt a sharp tingle, and then the screen went blank, and he waited, and waited, and *waited*. “Oh come on! How long does it ta...”

Oi, will you shut up, kid! A deep voice sounded in his head. **I'm trying to think.**

“Oh...” Haruto let out in surprise. He didn’t know it would do that. A grin slowly formed on his face. He was going to have the time of his life with SB3-QB9.

— 3 —

The KTS Kanopos' artificial light slowly brighten the ship. This close to the observatory, Haruto could just make out the Nebula star system. A handful of small droids littered the air, but not nearly as many as a couple of years ago. Small things like that worried him. Things were starting to break faster than they could be fixed. '*Still, if the old man wasn't worried, then I shouldn't be either.*'

Turning his attention away from the observatory, Haruto let his eyes fall on the nearby park. Although technically it was the KANP training grounds, it still had real trees and a small pond made of recycled water, which were all things that made up the parks of Kanopos. So, Haruto didn't see why the old man differentiated it from any other park.

'*Not as pretty as Sanctuary Park, but really nothing else is.*' He thought as he closed his eyes to imagine the small birds and other extincted species that called Sanctuary Park home. As the center piece of Pray Alley and his best friend's Clan sector, there wasn't another park that could compare. All in all, it wasn't all that surprising as the Gento Clan was known for it's patronage of the arts and conservation efforts. The Princess could go on

for days about that stuff.

The thought brought a small smile to his face. He quickly wiped it off, and waited, but his new AIM was strangely silent. Haruto relaxed at having his own thoughts to himself for as short as he knew it would be. QB would go out like this periodically as the AIM seemed to still by calibrating itself. It was only during times like these when he needed worry about QB using anything Haruto thought about against him. And QB mostly seemed to want to use the Princess.

Haruto couldn't get a thought about her in edgewise without QB bombarding him with questions about her. Questions he just wasn't ready to answer. It wasn't like he was hiding her or anything. It was just that for the four years they'd been friends, it had always been just them. And Haruto wasn't sure he was ready to share. That and the AIM was proving to be less than useless.

The Princess had warned him that the SB3 series was the closest Artificial Interface Module every developed to having functional artificial intelligence. At the time, Haruto had only cared about the theoretical performance. How else was he going to get an AIM that preformed on the same level as the Zhùróng Clan's or even the Princess' AIM? But so far all SB3-QB9 wanted to do was get its own body, and the thing didn't talking about getting one in a nice way. But somehow he was going to have to make this work.

Turning his attention to the world outside, he couldn't help but picture

himself in Sanctuary Park, minutes away from the Princess. There, life just seemed to be better. Little birds would play within the tallest trees of KTS Kanopos. Blues, blacks, oranges, pinks, every color of the spectrum. He'd seen a vivid purple bird once, fluttering amongst the leaves. Singing sweet songs. The thought taunted Haruto with endless possibilities just out of his reach.

'Why am I even here, again?' He questioned himself. Nothing the Lieutenants taught in class would be on the test. Half the time, Haruto was sure the Lieutenants were purposely skipping material that the students from the Clan's already seemed to know. While he couldn't prove it enough to go to the old man, every time Akihiko so much as turned his head to the window, the Lieutenant in charge would change topics.

And the Gods forbid if he asked a question. That never ended well for him or any of the other non-clan members. *'Well mostly,'* His eyes fell onto the silver haired girl one row in front of him. Tomorrow it would probably be light pink again as the Helian heir seemed to change hair colors faster than her mood swings. Cadet Helian Aeliana was the only exception to the non-clan members no asking questions rule. When he'd told the Princess about it, she'd mentioned something to do with politics after which he'd toned the rest of her explanation out.

Haruto looked down at his tablet. He knew better than to look over at someone else's knowing it was a quick way to detention. Still, out of the corner of his eyes he saw holograms playing. On his was just a dense set of

words, all in the ancient tongue.

He tried not to let the bitterness seep through. He should be lucky enough to have this tablet even if it was ancient. The loaner tablet, while several decades old was free and it worked. Sure, all it showed was the dense text, which he *was* supposed to know by now. And yeah, halograms were like a billion times more exciting to watch. But free was free. And he needed all the practice he could get in the ancient tongue if he was going to be a successful Pilot, anyway.

All of the ZenKZ created by the great Jade Empire used the ancestors' language. So of course all of KTS Kanopos' Pilots used it too. But despite the nearly four years he'd spent at KANP, Haruto still struggled with it. The Princess had tried to help, but her method of learning the language had been to spend hours upon hours for years studying it. He didn't have that kind of time or patience.

Oh stop feeling sorry for yourself, brat. QB answered causing Haruto to nearly jump out of his SKIM. **At least you have a body.**

'Dang it, QB stop doing that. Give a guy a warning or something.'
Haruto replied startled.

My name is SB3-QB9, you may call my that or QB9, nothing else you ungrateful brat! QB9 answered back. **You seem to forget I am in control of your bodily functions.**

Haruto snorted. *'Yeah, and if I die you die.'*

I never said anything about dying...

His wrist buzzed and an image of soiled SKIM flashed quickly. Haruto flushed at the thought, ‘*You won’t dare.*’

Try me, brat. QB9 answered. Haruto was really going to need to figure out some kind of compromise with the AIM.

‘*Stupid program doing whatever it freaking feels like.*’ He thought darkly, luckily QB9 didn’t bother to respond. He’d probably get what he wanted, if Haruto couldn’t figure out an alternative. ‘*What kind of name was QB9 anyway?*’

Doctor Fumagawa had a mind far more brilliant than yours. QB9 challenged. **Hēidòng, however. Trying hard aren’t we?**

‘*The Princess says the Hēidòng’s were an elite Clan that once mastered time and space.*’ Haruto countered.

Clan? QB9 replied in disbelief.

Haruto flushed, ‘*Well I didn’t say they were a Kanopos Clan.*’ He added quickly. Haruto felt an amusement not his own settle.

And who in the Gods’ name is this Princess? QB9 questioned.
You’ve been thinking about her constantly since I was activated.

Haruto ignored the jab at the end focusing on the new information, ‘*I suppose I should just tell him, but…*’

Answer the question, brat. QB9 growled out.

‘*I don’t know, QB9. You haven’t been all that nice to me.*’ Haruto responded teasingly as a feeling of anger not his own built within him.
‘*How about we make it a game?*’

A game, boy? I don't play games! QB9 responded in a low growl of frustration.

'You've been around for like ten seconds. Who would you know if you play games.' Haruto thought in response. The anger inside of him raged to a new level so Haruto changed tactics. *'Look, I'm bored and you want an answer that only I can give you,'* Haruto taunted. *'Seems to me like you don't have a choice.'*

Waiting the new rage released all at once, followed closely by a feeling Haruto could only identify as resignation. With a smile on his face, Haruto continued. *'I'll give you one hint, and only one hint to the Princess' identity. And if you can't guess her name with that one hint, then I get to call you QB.'*

And if I win? QB9 questioned. Haruto paused in thought, not entirely sure what an AI would even want. **My freedom.** QB9 answered for him. **I want my freedom.**

Haruto rolled his eyes at the dramatics. It wasn't as if he was holding the AIM captive or anything. The thing *was* an AIM after all. *'Sure, why not.'* Haruto replied. *'If you win, I'll get you a body of your own as soon as I can. Build it if I have to.'*

Satisfaction bubbled up from within him. **The hint, brat.** QB9 demanded.

'She's from a Clan.' Haruto smiled. *'Hey, I never said it would be a good hint.'*

Brat, you underestimate my skills! QB9 challenged. **That is more than enough for me.**

‘*Prove it.*’ Haruto replied. As far as he was concerned this was a win-win-win. He got to entertain himself, and he wasn’t going to have to do anything he wouldn’t have already agreed to do if the AIM had given him half a chance.

Well you’ve got a pretty smug feeling about you, so the nickname isn’t for just shits and giggles. If she’s in a Clan that rules out a great many girls, including that Helian. Really kid, you shouldn’t have given my the gender.

‘*I’m hearing a lot of talk.*’ Haruto replied. There was a long pause as Haruto could feel QB9 processing. ‘*You give up?*’ Haruto questioned as he kept his mind thinking of the trees outside and imaginary birds.

Impossible! QB9 spat out a moment later.

‘*So is that your way of saying you failed?*’ Haruto questioned.

Of course not, brat! QB9 responded. **My conclusion is simply impossible, even for you.**

‘*Either you give a guess or you give up QB9. Those are the rules of the game.*’

I believe this is her.

Buzz. Buzz.

Looking down at his BISM screen, Haruto found his Princess staring back at him in her formal Moon Princess coveralls. He smiled disappoint-

ingly, ‘Yeah, that’s her. My best friend.’

Then I win. QB9 gloated.

‘Hey now, that wasn’t part of the game.’ Confusion laced his thoughts but Haruto continued before QB9 could interrupt him properly, ‘Her name, QB9.’ He smiled at the blank response. ‘You’re supposed to guess her name.’

She’s the Gento heir, the Kōtaishi, QB9 huffs in frustration. **You don’t have access to the kind of information that would allow me to know more.**

‘That’s only because I have to clear our chat history weekly.’ Haruto replied cheekily. ‘Well QB9?’

You already knew I wouldn’t be able to get her name didn’t you. QB9 growled out. **You played me!** He roared in anger.

‘Hey now, don’t get mad. You actually got more than I thought you would.’ Haruto paused in thought seeing how this could go badly for him. ‘Look, why don’t we call it a draw. I’ll still help you out.’

You’re not calling me, QB. QB9 responded.

Haruto shrugged. ‘No big deal.’ QB9 settled down at his response.

Haruto leaned back in his chair as the Lieutenant continued to drone on at the front of the classroom. He wasn’t entirely sure what they were supposed to be learning and frankly he didn’t really care. Heck, he hadn’t even bothered to remember his Lieutenant’s name, and he’d had the man for months now.

The Clans.

“Huh?” Haruto questioned under his breath.

Lieutenant Cho is discussing the Clans. QB9 replied, sass heavy in his deep voice.

Haruto forced himself not to bang his head on his desk at the answer.

‘Why am I even here?’

Don’t be overly dramatic, brat. This is important information.

‘For you maybe, but nearly a quarter of this class is in the Clan. And I’ve known all about them for ages.’ Feeling QB9’s disbelief, Haruto continued as he looked to the front row. *‘The blond up front is Ilia the Amur Clan heir. I think they do mind control or something. I can’t really remember. But I do know that they’re involved in a lot of enhanced interrogations and the likes.’* Haruto looked over to Helian. *‘Side note, I’m pretty sure they’re dating.’*

How do you know any of that? QB9 questioned. **You don’t have access to that kind of information.** QB9 continued in accusing tone.

‘Best friends with the Gento heir remember.’ Haruto replied cheekily. Although he was sure the Princess had said significantly more on the topic of the Amur Clan, not that it mattered now. *‘Anyway, sitting next to her napping is Kur-ram. Cool guy and killer at Komi.’*

Kur-ram is not a Clan. QB9 replied shortly.

‘Oh, yeah. He’s the Krai heir. And the big guy next to him is Kenta the Sakhalin heir. They have the best food anywhere onboard.’

How is that relevant? QB9 demanded.

'How is it not relevant?' Haruto countered. Before QB9 could answer he continued. *'Anyway, the Princess says the three of them are like really old family friends and will be a Pilot unit together after OCI.'* Turning slightly in his seat his eyes landed on Akihiko. *'That brooding guy with the pinched face is the second son to the Zhùróng head family. Which apparently makes him as useful as a eleventh finger.'*

QB9 snorted in amusement. *'The kid with the symbiote on his head is Seo-Jun from the Gonsaeng head family. Solid guy to have at your back during a prank. Also cheats on every test.'*

Haruto sat back as he found himself lost in some of his favorite pranks with Seo-Jun.

And the kid in the back? With the goggles? QB9 questioned as a buzz came from his BISM. **He must be from the Haibeu Clan.**

'Who?' Haruto questioned as he looked at the stock picture on his BISM. Not recognizing the Cadet.

He is literally sitting in the back right now. QB9 growled anger leaking into his voice.

Turning his head quick, Haruto looked and sure enough they were there. *'Well what do you know.'* Haruto commented as he sat back to face the front. *'I guess that must be Ji-Min the Haibeu heir. The Princess mentioned they were in the class. Must have blocked them out again.'* Haruto added with a small shiver. *'Those guys give me the creeps.'*

QB9 was not amused. **There's only one of him.**

'Yeah, but since they're some kind of hive-mind, the correct pronoun is they/them.' Haruto replied easily.

I suppose your Princess told you all of that too.

'More or less.' Haruto replied. 'Honestly though, if you get in a game of Komi with Kur-ram he's an open book. The Sakhalin Clan are really nice and will feed just about anyone who shows up at their family get togethers no questions asked.' He continued for QB9's benefit.

He'd followed Seo-Jun to the Gongsang sector too many times to count. Haruto still remembered his failed attempts to get Seo-Jun's sister to give him one of her symbiotes. And if QB9 wanted to hear a biased opinion on the Zh'uróng Clan, then all Haruto had to do was insult Akihiko.

Is that is? Just the seven Clans if you count your Princess? QB9 questioned skeptically pulling Haruto from his thoughts.

'Oh, well no. There's twelve in total, and...' Haruto sighed. He really didn't want to have to explain them all. 'Give me a second, would you?'

Picking up his tablet, he tuned out Helian as she answered *another* question like her life depended on it. Personally, he thought she needed to learn a lesson in fun, but that was just him. Angling the tablet just right so the Lieutenant wouldn't see him accessing his BISM, he began to hack into his neighbor's tablet.

A moment later and he had the direct feeds from the Lieutenant's notes.

Oh, nice... QB9 murmured as he downloaded and sorted through the

data on the Clans. From the flashes coming across his BISM screen, he could tell QB9 was also following secure links to even more data.

Haruto turned his attention back to the window as he waited.

“...the Gento...”

Haruto’s attention was drawn to the Lieutenant at the front of the class at the sound of his best friend’s Clan name. While he liked to think of himself as an expert on the Clan, partly due to being best friend’s with the Princess and partly due to his continuous run-in with the Keepers, it never hurt to see if there was more to learn.

“As you all should have read last night, the Gento are one of the big four, and the one of the two original founders of our mighty KTS class ship,” the Lieutenant spoke.

‘There was homework?’ Haruto thought absentmindedly as the Lieutenant plowed on.

“What was not included in that reading; however, was the difficulty in getting the Gento Clan to join. The Sakhalin were all too happy to join in the cause. And the Zhùróng instantly saw the benefits of helping the shaping of a KTS class ship, which would be the first and only such ship within the Jade Empire.” The Lieutenant chuckled at the comment. “It would seem that Empire, great as it is, always seems to be last to the party.” He chuckled again at some random inside joke.

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’ Haruto thought as his mind began to wonder. The Princess used to tell him bedtime stories about her Clan

when he'd had trouble sleeping. The time of the Honorable Hanza, her great, great, great, great, grandfather, was one of her favorites.

"But the Gento, a powerhouse in their own right were reluctant to join their enemy." The Lieutenant tapped his own tablet sending information to the class. Haruto looked down at his only to see another block of dense text.

'Hard pass.' He thought, *'Besides, I've heard the story a dozen times now.'*

QB9 was quiet as he continued to process the new data.

"Their blood feud with the Fujimi, as you can see, is something out of the history books. Some of the greatest battles of that were recorded were between the honorable Fujimi Hoshizora and Gento Hanza."

Haruto let his eyes drift back to the world outside the classroom as murmurs erupted from the class.

"Lucky for us, a fabled friendship between the first Sakrá and the Honorable Hanza greatly aided the alliance process."

"What was the feud about?" Seo-Jun asked the Lieutenant.

Haruto answered for him, "Really Seo-Jun?" he commented. "Everyone knows that the Fujimi and Gento Clans were Pilots for hire and normally on opposite sides of battles during the Warring Stations period." He continued. "There was so much bloodshed, so much death..." he trailed off as he remembered the Princess' words. The pain heavy underneath them.

"A time where children younger than us fought and died." He added

lowly. “That’s why KTS Kanopos is so important. We’re here,” Haruto nodded to the classroom, “Until we’re ready to be out there.” He tilted his head to the window in the general direction of the observatory deck.

There was silence before Helian interrupted, “How do you know any of that?” Her words were accusatory. “It wasn’t in the reading, or in open records.” She continued.

Akihiko interrupted before the Lieutenant or Haruto could reply. “With the power of the Zhùróng Clan, there should have been no problem in defending and building the KTS ship. No reason to team up with the *Gento*.”

Haruto leaned forward anger at the disrespect to the Gento Clan on his friend’s behalf. “Like the Zhùróng could afford the expense or the man power?” Haruto already knew the answer. “The Gento put up half. *Half*. The construction cost of the KTS Kanopos. Gave up half their own ships, brethren, many who died in the defense of this great ship during construction. No profit, nothing gained but the honor of their Clan.” Haruto paused as he looked around at the stunned faces. “And we all know the Zhùróng aren’t well known for their *honor*.”

Akihiko’s nose flared, “How dare you...”

Haruto cut him off, “Without the Gento Clan, stick up their SKIM in all, KTS Kanopos would still be a dream of two young friends.”

“That’s enough, Cadet Hēidòng.” The Lieutenant interrupted. “While you have some facts amazingly correct, you’re wrong on several counts.

Most glaringly your claims on the Gento Clan's investment, which was not half of the funds and man power, but initially only half the funds. If not for the constant respect and fair treatment that the First Sakrá showed the Honorable Hanza, it's very possible that the Gento Clan may have never joined."

Haruto opened his mouth to correct him, but the glare of the Lieutenant caused him to shut it. He didn't often get warnings before being kicked out of class, but even Haruto knew one when he saw it.

"Now, if I may teach my class without further interruption." The Lieutenant snapped as he looked around the room. "Can anyone tell me about the terms of the treaty that the Gento Clan signed?"

Haruto watched as Helian shot her hand up into the air.

"Cadet Helian," Lieutenant acknowledged her with a nod.

"The Gento Clan were given the protection of KTS Kanopos forming the Keepers in exchange for never having one of their Clan members become the Sakrá," she answered swiftly. "They have since grown to be the most prominent Clan within Kanopos," Akihiko snorted at the answer, but it would seem that Helian wasn't done, "For example, the Kōtaishi is already considered a ranking officer despite being our age."

'Wow now, the Princess never mentioned that.' Haruto thought. He'd have to ask her about it later. 'Did she even need to go to OCI?' Because if she didn't, that changed *everything*.

"I see someone has done extra reading." The Lieutenant replied gripping

Haruto attention. “Cadet Helian is correct. When the Gento Clan joined KTS Kanopos, their treaty gave them the exclusive right to maintain and control the Keepers of the Peace that keeps watch over our great ship, in exchange for never having the ultimate power of the Sakrá.”

“Wait a second.” Haruto interrupted accidentally. “In the initial treaty?”

Lieutenant tightened his lips. “Are you hard of hearing too? Hard to believe with those ears.”

Haruto flushed in embarrassment. “No, it just the Keepers weren’t even mentioned in the initial Gento-Kanopos Treaty. That was added like fifty years after the completion of the ship.” Haruto leaned forward as he continued. “*And* the Gento didn’t join the Kanopos because of fairness and respect.” Haruto added not seeing how anyone could believe that. “Honorable Hanza had already made a deal with...”

“Enough Hēidòng!” The Lieutenant yelled. “I don’t know where you think you’re getting this information, but it’s all wrong. The official record states...”

“*I’m* getting this information from the Princess, eh Moon Princess, herself. And some how I think the heir of the Gento Clan would know her own history.” Haruto countered angrily.

The Lieutenant looked pissed for a second before his face returned to a blank mask. Haruto was sure he was about to get kicked out, but before the Lieutenant could speak Helian did.

“The Gento heir?” She questioned. “Moon Princess? You call the

Kōtaishi by her ZenKZ's name?"

"Well it's a nickname actually. She's got one for me too..."

"One for you?" Seo-Jun questioned his symbiote squeaked on his head.

"What are you on man, because there's no way your friends with the Kōtaishi."

Haruto crossed his arms in defense. "We're best friends. We talk all the time."

"Sure you do, idiot." Akihiko answered with sarcasm. "Because the Kōtaishi is friends with the dead last, Clanless orphan."

"The Hēidòng was a powerful Clan..." Haruto started to counter, but was interrupted as the entire room burst into a fit of laughter.

"But not a Kanopos Clan, which is why they're all but dead." The Lieutenant interrupted calmly as the laughter died down. "And Cadet," he continued looking at Haruto, "if you're going to lie make it a better one next time." The Lieutenant shook his head in disappointment. "Best friends with the Kōtaishi."

"I'm not lying." Haruto tried to defend.

"The door, Cadet." The Lieutenant pointed to the door. Staring Haruto down as he gathered his things.

With a huff Haruto slowly rose from his seat before walking out of the classroom. '*See if I care if they get the whole story wrong anyway.*' He thought as he closed the door behind him.

Still, this went a little further than normal. And the Ghost Hacker of

Kanopos didn't let anyone get away with laughing at him.

— 4 —

No one would say that Haruto had patience for much of anything. And even he had to admit that was mostly true. So far, he'd found only one exception, pranks.

Hacking into the feeds of one of the Zhùróng mechanical birds. As if anyone believed they were for anything but spying. Haruto took control of it and sent it hovering just outside of his classroom. Within moments the feed was running over his left retina. The first time he'd done this, he'd thrown up his lunch. Now, though the odd sensation of looking at the KANP training grounds in one eye and his classroom in another just made him a little nausea.

Sitting back, he leaned on the wall of the rooftop exit of the nearby building. And waited.

You really going to sit here and wait? QB9 questioned skepticism heavy in his voice.

'Welcome back to the living QB9.' Haruto replied jokingly.

**Seriously kid. There's a good half an hour before the lunch break.
And your little girlfriend doesn't break for lunch for another forty-five**

minutes. QB9 growled out in disbelief. **You can't even wait the three minutes it takes to heat up that stuff you insist on calling food.**

'First, MINOS is a gift from the Gods. Second, this is a prank.' Haruto replied, but he could still feel a disbelief that was not his own so he continued, *'Just watch and learn, QB9.'* Turning his attention to his BISM. It was time to prepare.

With quick fingers, Haruto had his programming logs up. As a log file, the Keepers never gave it more than a glance. Hidden within the log was a crude access point that would get him access to the GH mainframe, or rather allow him to bounce off the numerous amplify using his Hacker signature as the encryption password to get to the GH mainframe located in the basement of a building in Red Sector of Lower Level.

Surely someone would find it there. QB9 commented.

Haruto held back a snort at the comment, *'It's abandoned, and I promise you no one's going near that place.'* Haruto shivered at the risk he'd taken putting the thing in there, but he could still feel QB9's skepticism. *'Look, the building it's in is right next to the crazy, scary lady's place, well apartment building I think.'* Haruto continued.

Haruto thought she was either a former prostitute or a Pilot. Either way, the rumors that followed her meant that her property had an invisible barrier around it.

No one's that scary. QB9 commented at his unspoken thoughts.

'Yeah, well when you get a body of your own, you can test out that the-

ory.’ Haruto answered shortly as he started scrolling through his programs and viruses. ‘*There it is.*’ He thought as he landed on the SKIM virus he’d used to great effect on the Zhùróng oh so long ago.

It would need modification if he wanted it to work, but he was sure he’d get in done within the thirty minutes before lunch. And it would have to be during the lunch break as this Lieutenant was smart enough to keep his notes on him at nearly all times. It was just too bad that he was paranoid enough not to flush his system with the little drive on him. That would have made things even easier.

Really? The bathroom? QB9 questioned.

‘*There was one Lieutenant that should have been a little nicer to me.*’ Haruto thought in reply.

That’s why they have a separate flush system? QB9 continued more to himself than anyone else.

Haruto nodded even so, as he watched his classmates rush out of the room for lunch. ‘*Not that it matters. Since I gave myself administrative access to the staff system.*’ He continued in thought as he counted the last student. “Whatcha waiting for Lieutenant?” Haruto muttered under his breath as he continued to wait for the man to exit as well.

Haruto’s eyes went back to his BISM as he flipped to his encrypted master routine list. Under **KANP Lt. YEAR 4** Haruto found his random generator: **Flush, eat.**

‘*Good, I won’t have to wait long.*’ He thought as his left eye watched

the Lieutenant exit the room.

Exiting the little mechanical bird's vision so as to avoid running into a wall due to split vision, Haruto hopped off the rooftop heading back to KANP.

Wait a second. How did you get the man's randomized generator program? And all those other ones! QB9 demanded.

'*A lot of time and patience.*' Haruto replied as he stealthily made his way back into the empty classroom. '*Hey, give me three minutes.*' He asked.

I'm not your damn clock. QB9 growled back in response.

Haruto held back a sigh as he entered his own count down. **176..175..174..**

Lieutenant Cho, as QB9 had reminded him earlier, kept his drive in a secure box, multi-layer encryption. The kind of encryption that would normally take Haruto anywhere from twenty to thirty minutes to crack. In fact, he'd cracked this one in twenty-eight minutes and fifteen seconds, 10 weeks ago during a lunch break. Plugging in the encryption key, he was a little disappointed when it popped right open without needing any modifications.

'*No one ever bothers to update these things,*' He thought with a sigh.

165..164..163..

Stop complaining. We don't have time for modifications.

'*What? You saying you couldn't have broken a new multiple-level encryption in less than a minute? Where's that AI brilliance?*' Haruto replied

cheekily. QB9 growled in response.

Leaving the AIM alone, Haruto moved on to the next part, which was just as easy. Popping the device into his BISM, Haruto took the extra minute and a half to bypass the drive's encryption. Double layered security was all well and good, Haruto personally ascribed to it. Even so, if the inner layer wasn't either equal in difficulty or harder to crack, there really wasn't much of a point to it.

63..62..61..

Popping out the drive, Haruto placed it back in its protective box and was out the window with a minute to spare.

* * * * *

Perched back on the top of the nearby rooftop. Haruto waited comfortable as he hopped from one mechanical bird to another. In this way, he spent the remainder of lunch with a bird's eye view of Kanopos. And the other eye, blissfully closed.

Without warning, his vision was abruptly switched to a bird monitoring the classroom, which was already filling with his classmates. '*Oh, it's starting.*' He thought.

A 'thank you' would be nice. QB9 complained.

"Thanks." Haruto replied dismissively, but his attention was more on the classroom as the Lieutenant finally arrived. Pulling up the rear of a group of students. Moving to the front, the man pulled out his virsus containing thumb-drive and connected it to his BISM without a care in the

worlds.

A smile tugged at Haruto's lips in success. Now, it was just a waiting game. And he didn't have to wait long. One by one, the class looked down at their own BISM in confusion.

"What the..." Someone called out finally putting a voice to the general confusion in the room.

'That would be the virus taking over your SKIM.' Haruto answered darkly in his head as he continued watching with glee as the Lieutenant frantically tapping on his own BISM as if that would stop it a Ghost Hacker prank.

"No, no, no, nonono, *NO!*" The Lieutenant chanted from the front right before the room locked down.

"Oh, that's new." Haruto responded as he watched the battle alert flashers descended from the ceiling.

Kid, is it supposed to do that? QB9 questioned anxiously.

'No. The higher ups must have changed the threat response.' Haruto replied as the lights in the room began to flash red followed closely by the high pitched battle station alert sound. From here he could see the flood lights illuminating the floor as the emergency window exits popped open.

"Oh well." Haruto replied with a shrug. The higher response level wouldn't effect his prank.

"Code Red, Systems on lock-down. Kanopos Academy for Novice Pilots room 13 under...." The female automatic voice crackled off as Haruto's

BISM buzzed in warning.

This is not a drill. Flashed in bright red blocks of letter for a brief moment. “What do you know. They send that thing out to everyone regardless of location.” Haruto spoke aloud as QB9 overwrote the warning.

Deep cold laughter replaced the automatic voice causing Haruto to look up in surprise. “QB...”

It's QB9, brat. QB9 replied.

‘I don’t care what you want to be called. Why’s your voice going off in the classroom?! Did you do something to my program?’ Haruto thought wishing he could pull up the program to check. But he knew that soon enough his prank would actually take into effect and he didn’t want to miss a second of it.

I didn’t remove your hacker signature if that’s what you’re asking.

QB9 replied dodging the actual question.

‘That is not what I asked!’ Haruto thought as QB9’s deep laughter continued to fill his classroom. *‘What part of that program did you write, huh?’* He continued.

The first of the SKIMs began to flicker as QB9 replied. **It went through me didn’t it. That should be enough.**

Haruto shook his head as his class’ SKIMs started to change colors. Haruto smiled despite QB9’s additions as the green and pink began to make a pattern. In his head he replied, *‘We will be talking about what equates to contributions to a prank later.’*

The front room camera went off capturing the moment for all to see on the blackboard.

“How troublesome.” Kur-ram’s voiced, clearly the first to see the big f-u he’d given the class. A hand gesture he’d learned in the Red Sector of LL that the old man had made him promise never to repeat.

‘Well, technically I’m not.’ He thought as laughter began to bubble up from inside him. Looking down at his BISM, he was pleased to see the picture had turned out splendidly.

Sending it off to his friend, he wasn’t at all surprised by the instant fox face she’d sent back in reply. He nearly opened a new chat with her when sounds from his hacked bird caught his attention.

“What is the meaning of...” The Lieutenant began, but the sound of the rest of the KANP building entering Red alert drowned him out. Followed by more of QB9’s dark laughter echoed off the walls.

Haruto paused in horror. “Star dust!” He cursed. ‘QB9 is this you?’ He questioned.

Don’t look at me, brat. The AIM growled out in confusion.

Haruto flew the bird back and forth as each class seemed to be triggered exponentially fast. QB9 switched the camera back to his classroom as the Lieutenant looked around him in increasing horror. “No. Heavens above no. This *can’t* be happening.” The man’s fingers jabbed at his BISM futilely.

“Well,” Haruto spoke aloud. “This just got real serious.”

“Heidòng HARUTO!” The Lieutenant yelled at the top of his lungs.

“Star dust!” Haruto cursed again as he pulled hastily from the mechanical bird. Taking off from the rooftop at top speed. He bolted for his exit. One class and the old man would probably have a laugh with him. Two or three and he’d get a stern lecture. But the whole school?

I’d suggest running faster. QB9 added unhelpfully.

“HÉIDÒNG!” The Lieutenant yelled far to close for comfort.

‘*Rookie mistaking staying too long. What was I thinking?*’ He admonished himself as his feet took him across the rooftops.

Hopping off the building, Haruto flung himself around the corner and into the bustling crowd. He blended into the hectic group as he weaved his way across the Market Plaza. He just needed to make it through this crowd and he’d be home free.

‘*Of course nothing is ever that easy.*’ Haruto thought as he felt the tug of a soft link connecting his SKIM to someone else. Pulled backwards, his gaze met two sets of pale eyes missing their irises. ‘*Gento, Keeper Gento.*’ He thought darkly. ‘*Just my luck.*’

Are they allowed to just link with you like this? QB9 questioned mildly concerned.

“Keeper Gento, Keeper Gento,” Haruto greeted each Keeper warmly. “So, nice to see you,” he continued. To QB9 he added, ‘*Well yes and no.*’

QB9’s frustration at his answer was palatable as one of the Gento Keepers gripped his bicep hard. At the same time, the soft link dissolved. ‘*See, I kinda have an arrest on sight order out on me. So it’s technically allowed*

as long as they don't keep it.'

Figures. QB9 muttered.

"Cadet Hēidòng, shouldn't you be in class," questioned the Gento that still had him in a vice grip.

"Well, you see. I was just on my way back to class, so if you could..." he began pointing to the left as he edged towards the right. Visual misdirection sometimes worked wonders, but it wasn't helping him here.

Catching sight of his Lieutenant frantically searching for him out of the corner of his eye, Haruto silently cursed himself. The Gods' really had it out for him today.

The Keeper holding him turned slightly to his left in the opposite direction of his frantic Lieutenant. "Sir?" He answered hesitantly, loosening his grip in the process. Haruto had an idea about what that call was for and didn't plan on staying long enough to prove himself correct. Pulling himself out of the Keeper's grasp, Haruto made a run for it disappearing in the adjacent alleyway.

"Stop him!" A male voice called after him, but Haruto was only meters away from his destination.

Skidding to a halt in front of a the Market Plaza Central Terminal, Haruto flipped open the control panel as he hastily connected his BISM to the system. It shimmered as it began to start up, before blinking out.

"Star dust!" He cursed. '*The old man has got to keep at least the Market Terminal in working order!*' He thought harshly as his mind raced through

his options. ‘*I could bypass the damaged circuitry with my BISM, but that will take at least five minutes.*’

We don’t have time for this. QB9 growled out harshly.

Frustration flashed across Haruto’s eyes. As if he didn’t know already. Before he could complain aloud, the Terminal screen blinked back to life.

“Thanks,” Haruto murmured as his fingers danced along the screen as he forced the Terminal into command console instead of normal boot. A moment later and he’d forced his Portal Jump program through the system. “Come on, come on, come on.” Haruto chanted to himself as he watched line after line of code pass along his BISM screen.

Any day now, kid. Any day, would be nice. QB9 replied his sarcasm tinted with worry.

‘*I’d like to see you go faster!*’ Haruto countered.

Feeling QB9’s annoyance, Haruto was unsurprised when the AIM spoke again. **I’m optimizing your programs as soon as we’re out of this mess.**

“Code Yellow, MPCT under cyber attack.” A light female modulated voice boomed from the aerial speakers above, giving away his position to the angry Lieutenant behind him. Big black letters flashing on the Terminal’s screen. **ACCESS DENIED.** Blinking over and over again.

‘*Yeah, yeah, yeah.*’ Haruto thought just as the screen turned green. **ACCESS GRANTED.** Flashed quickly on the screen, silencing the alarms in the process. In another moment, he had the Terminal service entrance opened.

Buzz. Buzz.

“What now?” He asked aloud as he stepped into the service tunnel. QB9, helpful for once, opened the message for him.

MPrincess: Are you alright?

Haruto didn’t know how she knew that the KANP prank had gone a little overboard already, but honestly wasn’t all that surprised.

“*Hēidōng!*” Haruto heard his name called from what might have been his out of breath Lieutenant as his fingers typed his response.

GhostHacker: Yeah, I’m good. KANP just got a little exciting for once.

GhostHacker: Talk to you later, okay. I’ve got to go dark, now.

The service entrance closed as the Lieutenant’s irate face came into view. Haruto waved goodbye with a huge smile.

Buzz. Buzz.

Haruto was surprised when QB9 opened the message without begin asked.

MPrincess: Don’t get caught.

Well, that was one warning he didn’t need saying twice.

— 5 —

Heat blasted from the furnaces pumping air heated by many processes within core of Solas. And in the process creating a dense humid blanket of heat around the young redhead. While not the hottest place on KTS Kanopos, the junkyards of the Lower Levels, better known as Black Sector, had certainly earned the title of being the *second* hottest place onboard. And because today, Haruto's luck seemed to be fairly poor, he'd landed in the junk heap that most just called the Hell Yard, which as he'd learned long ago wasn't named for it's lovely gardens, but for the unfortunate connection to Zhùróng Pyro-Studios.

All-in-all, there wasn't much that called the Black Sector home, but recycle bots. As such, Haruto, being as human as the next pound of flesh, was reduced to a sweaty mess. A sweaty mess that was at constant danger of breaking his carefully crafted illusion program at even a single drop of sweat. At the thought a bead ran down his forehead, reaching the collar of his SKIM where it was quickly absorbed back into his suit. Another bead followed and another. And Haruto knew it was just a matter of time when the God of Luck would truly turn his back on him.

Without warning a cool sensation wrapped around his neck, causing his body's temperature to decrease a fraction. Haruto blinked in surprise, but otherwise made no outward signs of his changing temperature. '*Thanks QB9,*' he thought. Who knew the guy had a heart after all?

Annoyance filtered through his consciousness. **It wasn't for you, brat!** His AIM's voice boomed in his head in stark contrast to the quiet around them.

Haruto rolled his eyes, but ignored the AIM. He didn't have time to respond as the heavy footsteps of his pursuers echoed overhead. Several paused before continuing on in a standard search pattern. Steps then silence. Steps followed by silencing again.

Slowing his breath even further, he didn't dare move sure. The slightest move now would be his undoing as the Keepers would be using a bio-scan to search for any signs of life no matter how small. That along with the famed Gento bionic eyes, they'd also pick up any residual electronic signals. Both of which easily penetrated the black light of Black Sector. A fact that he was using to his advantage.

Why not just develop a cloaking device? QB9 growled out. This program is far more complicated than simply reflecting the space around you to generating empty space.

'An empty space is like a big red flashing light saying I'm right here hiding. Take a look around QB9. This will work. It always has.' Haruto replied as he waited.

“Check the next section.” A female voice rang clear. “He’s here somewhere, so find him.”

“Yes, ma’am!” A chorus of voices replied. Haruto could already imagine them with their tight salutes. The Keepers might as well be military for all their traditions and formalities.

Paramilitary, actually. QB9 sounded.

‘*What?*’

The Keepers, they’re paramilitary. QB9 answered. **Figured every once and a while, you’d like to be right for a change.**

Haruto’s eyes fluttered shut in annoyance as the sound of footsteps retreating overhead. ‘*One problem at a time.*’ He chanted to himself, ‘*One problem.*’

Right now, he needed to stay still. He’d learned the hard way that the Keepers always left a small two man team behind. And if he didn’t want to get into trouble, he’d have to wait them out too. Holding back a sigh, he tried to keep his body relaxed and his heart rate slow and steady. ‘*Why am I even going through all of this trouble?*’ He questioned himself. Why hid for another hour or two, stuck doing nothing when the Keepers were out with a vengeance?

Honestly, there was nothing that linked him directly with the prank. Sure the old man would still lecture him, but that always ended with dinner. And yeah, the Princess would never let him hear the end of it, but he could live with that too.

Don't you dare, brat! QB9 growled out as Haruto was slowing talking himself into just turning himself in. **If you get caught, I get caught!**

'Well as long as you didn't take anything, but the lecture notes, we should be fine. It's not like there were any witnesses.' There was a long pause in response to his thoughts. Unease and guilt rolled through him in waves. 'QB...' He thought warily.

Don't get caught, kid. QB9 responded shortly.

Haruto held back another long suffering sigh of frustration. Trust his AIM to do something to get him into even bigger trouble. The Princess was going to have a field day with this one. Well, a polite field day, but the teasing would be endless.

Soft footsteps padded along the catwalk overhead, pausing a little too close to his actual position for comfort. Haruto closed his eyes and slowed his heartbeat further. Seconds later the footsteps moved on. The illusion program he was running, code named *Rusty Bucket*, worked best with a slow heartbeat and overall calm mentality, which was hard to do when a stupid overbearing AIM had to go and do something stupid.

I'm hardly the stupid one. QB9 growled in outrage. As if he was the one personally offended. **That Lieutenant should have known better.**

Haruto continued to count his heartbeats in his mind a technique he'd picked up from his friend. *'Just keep calm, you've been in worse spots.'* He thought to himself. But what he wouldn't give to see if the *Rusty Bucket* program was still running smoothly? In his mind, he got an image of

the program steadily changing his heartbeats into weak irregular electrical outbursts. His SKIM still outputting the properties of a rusty metallic surface that was being warmed by the furnaces above. Everything looked good, but the rusty bucket wasn't supposed to run for more than a couple of hours.

We've still got plenty of time. QB9 replied. **Just stay still.**

'Easy for you to say, you don't have any biometrics to give away our position.' Haruto thought darkly. And if it wasn't for his good for nothing AIM, they wouldn't even be in this mess. QB9 was strangely silent at his thoughts. *'What did you take anyway?'* Haruto questioned.

QB9 remained surprisingly silent, which made Haruto want to laugh in disbelief. The AIM didn't want to shut up before, couldn't stop himself from pointing out how stupid Haruto was being. But now? The silence of the void. And if they did get caught, it wouldn't take long for the Keepers to find those files, those obviously important files. *'And with the files, they'll be able to pin the hack on me.'* Haruto thought darkly. While he was still a minor, that didn't change the fact that giving a virus to a classroom of students, or anyone for that matter, was a serious offense.

'The old man isn't going to be able to save me from this one.' He thought worriedly.

Don't get caught, and we won't have to worry about anything. QB9 finally spoke up.

'You owe me for this one.' Haruto thought harshly. QB9 didn't respond,

but Haruto knew he'd get to collect on this later. For now, '*I'll wait.*'

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‘*Forever and a day later,*’ Haruto thought as he stretched out his tense muscles.

It’s only been 46 minutes and 27 seconds, brat. QB9 interrupted.

‘*Says you.*’ He replied back in thought as he stood up from behind the junkyard trash. As far as he cared, if it felt like forever, then it might as well have been. QB9’s annoyance surfaced briefly, but Haruto was getting better at ignoring it.

Stretching his arms to the ceiling as he twisted here and there to work out the remaining kinks, he was pleased to see that he was indeed alone. Nothing but the junkyard bots working on disposal of Kanopos trash.
‘*Completely harmless.*’

Grinning wide, he jogged down from his position in the trash heap, and on to the catwalks around him. A terminal was only a few paces from this spot, but he’d have to avoid it. Connecting to the network now would only be calling attention to his position. Touching his BISM, he let *Rusty Bucket* drop. At nearly two hours, it was at the limit of its proper functioning range anyway. He’d have to tinker with it later, who knew if he’d ever need it for

longer periods of time in the future. For now, he was still a little upset that QB9 had cost him a few hours out of his day.

“Oh well,” he spoke aloud with a light shrug. It had been a good prank, so all-in-all a good day. Setting out to his apartment on foot, Haruto began the long trek home. Even if the wait had been unnecessarily long because of his AIM’s curiosities, a good prank was worth it. ‘*And that’s going down as one of my best.*’

Haruto’s stomach growled reminding him that he’d only had breakfast today. Putting his hands behind his head, he closed his eyes as he let his mind wonder on what he wanted to eat for dinner. ‘*I can make a MINOS stir fry.*’ He thought picturing MINOS noodles in a bowl of vegetables, only he didn’t have any vegetables. ‘*Okay, so stir fry without the veggies.*’ A bowl of fried noddles without the veggies entered his mind, ‘*Which is really just fried noodles. So fried noodles for dinner than.*’

You had MINOS for breakfast. Eat something else, kid.

‘*Why in the world would I want to do that? MINOS is the food of the Gods!*’ Haruto replied seriously.

There was a moment before the deep voice of QB9 entered his mind,

You have an unhealthy obsession with this stuff.

‘*Impossible.*’ Haruto replied immediately, ‘*Nothing that is both nutritious and delicious can be unhealthy.*’ Humming a few bars of the MINOS jingle, he skipped a few steps in his eagerness to get home.

You can’t honestly believe that propaganda, can you?

Haruto furrowed his brow as he turned into a back alley easily by-passing the *random* Keeper patrol. He'd fight with QB9 on just about any topic, but *not* his MINOS, not his favorite food, '*I already get enough nagging from the Princess. I don't need you too, QB9.*' Haruto thought feeling QB9's annoyance he continued. '*Besides it's organic, so of course it's healthy for me.*'

So is shit, but you don't eat that. QB9 replied with heavy sarcasm in his voice hiding the AI's outrage. Haruto didn't care. There was nothing QB9 could say that would convince him that MINOS wasn't a gift from the Gods. If his best friend couldn't, then an AIM with more attitude than usefulness wasn't going to be able to either. **Look kid, if you die young, don't complain to me.**

'*If I die, you die QB9! Or have you forgotten that already.*' Haruto countered.

Not if I get out of here first...

Haruto rolled his eyes at QB9's familiar dramatics. He wasn't going to die young anyway. MINOS was healthy for you. '*It's has to be. It has Nutritious and Organic in the title.*'

Malleable, Ingestible, and Substance are in there too. QB9 countered. Haruto could feel his imaginary eye roll. His annoyance knocked up another level. **Ever wonder why they need to specify that it's Ingestible, kid?**

'*Don't know, don't care.*' Haruto continued as he ducked behind a build-

ing allowing another patrol to pass him. Princess had sent him a bunch of nutrious facts about the stuff. All of which he'd deleted without opening. There was nothing QB9 could say that she hadn't already tried.

'You know what I do know?' Haruto didn't wait for an answer. *'When I get home I'm going to have a nice big bowl of fried MINOS noodles with some shrimp flavored broth.'*

Heading up the stairs to his apartment, he hummed a light tune that sounded suspiciously like the MINOS jingle. Tapping his BISM to a refurbished biometric scanner that kept his apartment on lock down mode, the door opened with a quick **Access Granted**.

He'd personally fixed and updated a broken one years ago knowing that security was not to be taken lightly. This along with some other rather nasty security measures made his apartment one of the most secure building on KTS Kanopos.

'And off limits.' Haruto added to himself as he made his way into his dark home and into the kitchen for his much awaited MINOS dinner.

Don't move. QB9 warned. **We've got company.**

Haruto's first thought was, *'Impossible.'* But there sitting on his good chair was Guardian Inugami. *'The old man sent a Guardian after me?'* It was unbelievable, unthinkable, but there the dog god mask stared him down in his own kitchen. *'This is not good.'* He thought as he took a tentative step back. He'd curse QB9 aloud if he wasn't technically supposed to have him. He had no idea what the AI took, *his* AIM took, but it was clearly

even more important than he'd initially thought.

Another step back as his mind whirled with this new discovery. He had one option available to him. Get the heck out of here. '*If I can get to the door, my emergency escape route will take me back to the Lower Levels.*' Then he'd lay low for a couple of days. After which, the old man should have taken care of the situation.

By the *Gods*, QB9 owed him for this one.

One thing at a time, kid. QB9 voice sounded softly in his mind. **Get out of here, and we'll talk about it.**

"Hello, little Haruto." Inugami spoke from his seat in the kitchen.

"Hey Inugami." Haruto replied as if nothing was amiss, "What a surprise seeing you here." He smiled at his favorite Guardian, even when he knew it would get him nowhere. "If I'd known you where coming, then I'd have..."

Before Haruto could finish, Guardian Inugami interrupted him. "Stayed in the Lower Levels I imagine." The distorted voice had a hint of amusement as he continued to speak, "By the way, you have a lovely home. I'm even impressed with your security. Very impressive. Sorry I had to disable it all."

Haruto held back his frown, those traps had taking months to layer and assembly. Years if you counted the upgrades he'd been continuously adding. '*And Inugami doesn't even sound sad after destroying all my hard work.*' QB9 owed him *big time* for this one. Even so, now wasn't the time to mourn his security system.

Staggering back several steps, Haruto placed his hands over his heart in mock hurt. Pain entering his eyes within a single blink. “How could you say that Inugami?” Genuine hurt coloring his words. Haruto could also cry on command if the need arrived. Although tears rarely worked with the Guardian these days.

Good kid. Nice and slow. Just a little further. QB9 replied so that Haruto didn’t have to take his eyes off of the Guardian to gauge how far he was from the door.

“You wound me, Inugami. After all we’ve been through. This is a new low.” Another step back as Haruto righted himself shaking his head in disappointment. “I would gladly have you over for dinner.” Another step back as he looked back up at Guardian Inugami. “How could you think otherwise,” he demanded hurt coloring his words.

“Well,” the Guardian let the word draw out in the silence between them. Standing up he continued, “This afternoon’s incident at KANP might have a little something to do with it.”

“KANP?” Haruto asked with practiced confusion clouding his eyes and face. If this Pilot stuff didn’t work out, he might just join a theater troop.

Don’t over sale it kid. We’ve still got a few more steps to go. QB9 responded.

Haruto continued as if QB9 hadn’t said a word, “I got kicked out before lunch time, so I must have missed all of the excitement.”

The Guardian shrugged in response. “Be that as it may, still going to

have to take you in.”

Haruto felt his heel meet the solid frame of his front door. His face transforming as QB9 opened it for him. “Gotta catch me first!” Spinning on his heels he launched himself out the door as he yelled his victory cry over his shoulder.

Slam!

Falling backwards into his doorway, Haruto landing hard on his backside. “Owh” ‘*What the...?*’ Looking up, he saw the unmistakable mask of the weasel god, Kamaitachi.

“Going somewhere, Cadet Hēidòng?” Guardian Kamaitachi’s soft voice asked.

“Wha? No.” Haruto replied. ‘*I’m not now anyway.*’ “Just trying to get some more fresh air in here. The apartment’s not really built for more than one person.” Thinking rapidly, Haruto made a harmless reach for the door frame as if to stabilize himself. ‘*Now would be a good time to off load that stolen data, QB9.*’

What? Are you stupid kid? Right in front of them?

‘*Just access the axial terminal.*’ Haruto could feel QB9 confusion at his reply.

But it's on the far side of the kitch... QB9 trailed off mid-word. He must have found Haruto’s emergency connection. **Clever boy, a second axial terminal.**

‘*Routed to the apartment below us. For emergencies,*’ Haruto answered

back.

Yeah, emergencies. QB9's sarcasm was as unwelcome as always, but Haruto hide his annoyance.

'How long do you need?' Haruto asked, but QB9 didn't reply.

"Of course," Guardian Inugami replied behind him closer than before, "*Fresh air.*"

"Please come with us, Cadet Hēidòng." Guardian Kamaitachi added. While their distorted voices were nearly identical, Haruto could have easily picked them out in a crowd. And probably only these two Guardians given how often he'd had a run in with them.

"Now hold on just a minute." Haruto turned slightly so that he could see Guardian Inugami as well. "The old man said as long as I made it home unaccosted, then I couldn't be charged with anything. Including whatever this nonsense is you guys are going on about." Haruto crossed his arms as he leaned further into the doorway, getting closer to his secondary axial terminal that he wasn't legally allowed to have.

"Every student is being questioned, Haruto." Inugami explained. "And you're BISM is the only one unaccounted for."

"I already told you, I wasn't at KANP when all this went down." Haruto countered. "What next? Are you going to start accosting everyone in the ship?"

"We never said what time the incident occurred, Cadet Hēidòng." Guardian Kamaitachi tried to catch him in a lie completely ignoring his accusation.

It was an amateur attempt at best.

“Yeah, and it doesn’t matter because nothing happened when I was *in* KANP. Therefore, I clearly wasn’t involved!” Haruto argued back. He wasn’t sure how long he could keep this going before they just carried him there. But knowing Inugami, they’d at least try to get him to walk on his own. He was, after all, a lot heavier than he looked.

“If that’s the case, then this won’t take long to get sorted.” Kamitachi continued.

“I haven’t had dinner yet! You could at least let me eat something.” Haruto continued in a different line as he unfolded his arms better to not stay in one position for too long or they’d wonder why. “You and I both know this could take hours!”

“Time’s a concept, kid.” Inugami replied.

“Then you won’t mind if I have some dinner first.” Haruto countered smoothly.

“Orders are orders, Cadet Hēidòng.” Guardian Kamitachi added softly.

Inugami motioned for Haruto to stand clearly done arguing, “Come on Haruto, the sooner we get down to Solas the sooner this will all be over.” Haruto pouted and remained seated. A tantrum would give him one maybe two more minutes, but not much more. ‘*Any day now, QB.*’

“For you maybe.” Haruto answered as he began his big sulk routine.

Guardian Inugami clearly knew the signs. “Haruto...” He warned.

Done.

Doing a complete 180, Haruto's face transformed, "Fine. Fine. Fine. Alright." Standing he continued, "I'll go, but I'm going under protest." Dusting himself off, he turned to go with the Guardians. "And when this is over, I'm going to want a formal apology!"

Guardian Kamaitachi hand found his back, linking into his SKIM with practiced ease, "I'm sure the people in charge will handle the situation appropriately, Cadet Heidòng."

Tapping out the MINOS jingle on the steel table in front of him, Haruto continued his mental game of creating more and more creative dishes he could make with the wondrous food. *'With some of that green leafy stuff, I could make a nice noodle dish. Maybe even one of those interesting looking pastas. Give it a little color.'* He thought as a mental image of a saute greens with some real peppers grilled just right. He'd seen something like it in on a Halo screen commercial once. He couldn't remember what they called the green stuff, but he was sure if he had the right ingredients, he'd be able to recreate the dish.

'Of course, I'd need vegetables.' His mind continued to wonder. Those things weren't exactly cheap either. Easier to get some of the POPPERS, but those required a rehydrator. *'Maybe I should grow something other than herbs and spices.'*

Oi! Will you think of something else? Anything else? QB9 replied in a low growl. Haruto looked down in front of him at the empty steel interrogation table. The room was brightly lit as he'd known it would be. It would flash horribly annoying pattern every time he so much as slumped

his head. A tactic commonly used to keep prisoners awake, which worked surprisingly well on him too.

Blinking away exhaustion, Haruto tried to focus back on the angry AIM. ‘*Well, you could entertain me...*’ QB9 indignant snort interrupted his thoughts.

I am not some plaything. QB9 growled out, again. They’d had this conversation before. In fact, if he was remembering correctly, just three hours ago. Haruto’s thoughts immediately went back to his game.

‘*I wonder if I can bake MINOS...*’ A deep hunger burned through him at the thought causing Haruto jump in his seat at it’s intensity. ‘*What the...*’ He thought questioningly. One moment he’d been perfectly fine and the next, well.

I give up! QB9 growled out in frustation. Confusing clouding Haruto’s thoughts as hunger continued grow with each passing second. **You think it's easy suppressing your hunger?** QB9 roared in his mind answering the unasked question bouncing in Haruto’s mind still half formed. **Try doing it, while you're thinking of food!**

With a sharp intake of breath, Haruto closed his eyes against the sudden pain of his hunger. ‘*Please...*’

A second later and he was fine again. Sighing in relief, he leaned back in his chair. ‘*I'll stop thinking about MINOS,* he thought. ‘*But next time, don't bother with the hunger suppression.*’ He continued, ‘*It's easier to wait out if I know I'm hunger. And how hunger I am.*’

Next time! Haruto smiled at QB9's outrage. It was strange, but nice.

'Well, yeah. You think this is new.' He thought in amusement.

They shouldn't be allowed to do something like this! QB9 continued.

Starving you! It's barbaric.

'It's also a very good tactic for coercing a confession.' Haruto thought back. He remembered the first time the Keepers had used the tactic on him. He'd caved after an hour. After which, he'd trained his body to handle exactly 24 hours of the treatment. *'This won't last much longer. They can't keep a minor for longer than 24 hours without an arrest.'* He continued in his mind.

QB9 was oddly quiet for a moment. Haruto tried to keep his mind on task. The lights flickered in the room causing a mild headache that went away nearly as soon as it started. He had to admit, QB9 had his uses. Before, he'd have just had to live with the pain, and the hunger.

It's still barbaric. QB9 spoke again slightly calmer.

Haruto shrugged to no one. If he was lucky, the Keepers watching would get the wrong idea and think he was cracking. They'd at least get some entertainment.

15 hours and 56 minutes. QB9 continued angrily. Haruto looked down at his BISM to double check QB9 math, but he shouldn't have bothered.

'Think of it more as only 8 more hours to go.' Haruto added kindly. He wasn't used to anyone getting angry on his behalf. Even Princess saw it as the price to pay for getting caught. It really was weird.

No sleep, no food, no water. QB9 continued as if Haruto hadn't thought a word. **And not a soul has come to question us!**

'Well, technically that's a good thing.' Haruto continued before he could bring QB's wrath down on him sensing the pent up rage building. 'No, really. This means they have nothing on us.' Haruto waited to see if QB would explode, but he didn't.

'Besides, I've gone without food and water for longer than the 24 hours they can hold us, much longer,' he continued. 'Lack of sleep isn't fun, but doable. Really they should update their tactics, this is becoming routine now. We'll be fine.'

It's still barbaric. QB9 replied after a moment of silence. **And don't get comfortable calling me QB!** He added.

Haruto grinned widely, 'You owe me big time. I can call you whatever I want.'

QB9 grumbled in his mind, but didn't reply causing Haruto to grin even wider. Hunger gnawed at him for a moment, but was gone a second later. Haruto just giggled in response.

I still don't see why they don't at least let us sleep. If nothing else. QB9 whined as he changed the topic.

Haruto sighed in reply. He was going to have to look up these cohesion techniques again, so his AIM would understand. They'd find themselves here again soon enough. He didn't want to have to hear this whining again. Just to get him to stop, Haruto contemplated going back to his MINOS

game.

Just hack into their system. I'll look into the information myself.

Haruto laughed aloud at the thought. ‘*Not on my life.*’ He replied. Confusion laced his thoughts so he explained, ‘*Worst idea you’ve come up with today, QB.*’ Before QB9 could reply, Haruto continued, ‘*No, look.*’

Tilting his head up, Haruto paused briefly at the innocent looking reflector dome. ‘*Looks like a hidden camera, but that’s actually a security firewall hub.*’ Turning his head to the other corner he continued, ‘*Both of them.*’

Tilting his chair back so that he was balancing on two legs, he looked over his shoulder at the terminal in the corner. ‘*And that’s a third made to look like a regular terminal.*’

Three? That seems like overkill. QB9 replied, but he didn’t insistent Haruto hack into the system for him. So, he settled back on four legs a grin of pride shaping his face.

‘*Well, this is the most secure interrogation room in all of the Keeper Towers.*’

You shouldn’t feel smug about that, brat. QB9 replied shortly, but Haruto didn’t care. When they’d been lead to Tower One, Keeper Headquarters of all places, he’d been both confused and prideful. This prank was shaping up to be one of his best of all times. Right next to the accidental pranking of the entire Zhùróng Clan. He couldn’t wait to talk about it with the Princess.

Haruto rubbed on the steel table before him, ‘*Can’t help it, QB. See this room and me have a long history, and some really good times.*’ His mind wondered to a different prank all together.

You pranked the Keeper dormitories! QB9 spoke in outrage. Haruto blinked out of the memory.

‘*Technically, it was just one. And the dye washed out... eventually.*’ Haruto explained.

No wonder they hate you.

‘*Now, I wouldn’t say that. They just don’t like losing all the time.*’ Haruto countered. ‘*Besides, no one can prove that was me.*’

Unless your Princess decides to squeal on you. QB9 added.

‘*Like I said, no one can prove that was me.*’

While Haruto joked around with QB9, he tried not to let his worry bleed in. Those pranks had been fun, and while he’d ended up here no Guardians had been involved. And while Guardian Inugami or Kamaitachi might pick him off the street from time to time. That was mostly for when *they* caught him doing something he wasn’t supposed to do. Even when they caught him, they always, *always* took him to Central Tower to see the old man. This was different. This was... troubling.

Pushing his chair back to two legs, he called over to the two-way mirror behind him, “Hey! Can I get some juice in here?”

He waited a beat, but no one responded. ‘*Oh well, worth a try.*’ He thought as he dropped his chair back down on all fours. ‘*So, if I can’t think*

of MINOS, what should I think about?' He asked.

Well, if you've got time to listen. I think now is an excellent time for us to discuss OCI...

Haruto let out an audible sigh. '*How do you even know about that?*'

There was a long pause before the AIM answered, **Does it really matter?**

'Translation, from the stole docs at KANP.' Haruto thought in response.

This school seems very important to becoming a Pilot. QB9 continued as if Haruto hadn't even spoken.

'Not that important.' Haruto countered just for the fun of it. '*I built you didn't I? So I hardly need OCI to become a Pilot.'*

Refurbished me. Refurbished. A ZenKZ-D is different.

Haruto shook his head in disagreement. '*I find an old one just like I found you and I fix it up. No different and no problem.*' He'd talked to the Princess about it and even she agreed that would fast track him to a Pilot captaincy no problem. No, he didn't need OCI for that.

I don't have time to waste for you to somehow 'find' a ZenKZ-D.

QB9 growled back. **Besides, that not the point!**

'Oh and here I thought we were talking about me.'

You think I want to be stuck here for the rest of your short pathetic life!? QB9 roared. **OCI will fast track me to my freedom. You owe me that.**

'First off, that was a little harsh, QB.' Before QB9 could interrupt,

Haruto continued. ‘*And second, I already promised to get you a body. OCI or not that’s still going to happen.*’

I don’t have time for you to find your own way. QB9 growled low.

This, OCI, is our chance to escape this Hellhole of a ship.

Haruto sighed at the rage coming from QB9. Kanopos wasn’t that bad, but he did have his own body so... Shaking his head, Haruto counted his heart beats in an effort to calm them both down. This really was a pointless argument, and had not been half as entertaining as he thought it would be.

Pointless! QB9’s rage bubbled back up.

‘*QB9, calm down. The old man and I talked about this and...*’

Old man? QB9 interrupted. **What old man? You’re an orphan, you don’t have family.**

‘*Well, he’s the...*’ before Haruto could finish the thought the door to his interrogation room opened with a bang. Haruto checked his BISM before he spoke aloud, “Oh, you can do better.” Looking up with an impish grin he continued, “I’ve only been in custody for little more than 16 hours.”

Brat... QB9 warned, but Haruto knew what he was doing. This was new to QB, but not him. Not by a long shot.

“Cadet Hēidòng, you and I both know you’re the one responsible for the KANP incident yesterday.” The Keeper Captain questioned as she stood above him. Her Gento eyes piecing him with her glare, but other than that not another muscle was out of place. Haruto looked behind her at the still open door, but she was alone, which meant they’d found nothing after all.

His grin widen as he replied to her, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Captain.” His eyes sparkled, but she could do nothing about that.

“A likely story,” she replied. “Care to explain why you were in the area during the KANP incident?”

Haruto pushed his chair back so that he could put his feet up on the table, taunting her silently as he spoke, “KANP incident? I still have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The Captain placed her hand gentle on the steel table next to his feet. If she were anyone else, from any other Clan, he imagined she’d push his feet off the table causing him to fall down. The alarming sensation QB9 was sending him, told Haruto that QB9 thought she was only moments away from doing just that. *‘But she’s a Gento. Decorum means everything to them, even in the face of the enemy.’* He thought as his eyes never left her vibrating ones. Gray blended with white, and hints of blue. Whirling faster than they had any right to be. Oh she was all kinds of furious.

“I didn’t hear an answer in all of that.” She replied coolly, “Perhaps, it’s because you have no explanation for why you illegally hacked into your own BISM?”

Haruto shrugged, “I do that once a week, which you should know. Captain Daichiko, wasn’t it?” She’d never given her name, and he didn’t expect her too. But he’d have been remiss not to recognize the Commanding Captain of the Five Towers. “As I’m here once a week to get it set back.”

Her mouth didn’t even twitch at his familiarity with her. She was good.

'No wonder, you're the Command Captain.' He thought as he continued to study her for the first time up close. *'But I'm better.'*

Rocking back and forth he smiled openly at her. There was nothing that got under the Keepers skin more than open display of emotions they couldn't predict, and lack of decorum. He made fun of it all the time with the Princess. "Or did the old man change his mind about that since last week's check-in?" Haruto continued.

"This is a serious offense, Cadet. Or do you think infecting others with a virus is a game?" Captain Daichiko continued her voice even.

"The best you could get me on is spoofing, which you very well know. And you'd have to prove I spoofed anyone, which you haven't." He paused his rocking to stare her down, she didn't turn away, but they were still the only ones in the room. "Seeing as you've had a clone of my BISM since I arrived here, and the best you can come up with for the reason of my *false* arrest is I was in the area, I think it's about time you let me go."

The Captain's eyes clouded in her agitation. Seeing his time to strike, he let his chair fall back down on all fours as he pulled his legs from the table.

"So, are you going to leave me here for some eight odd hours or let me go now, Captain?" The Captain didn't show any signs of weakness, but her eyes still whirled. "By now, you've had plenty of time to search my apartment, along with the clone of my BISM. And still nothing."

Brat, don't give them any ideas. QB9 warned.

'Relax, QB. There's a reason the emergency terminal connects to the apartment below mine.' Haruto thought as he continued his conversation with the Captain, "So, what's it going to be?"

"Interesting you would bring that up. As a search of your apartment did bring something to light." Captain Daichiko countered as she let silence feel the space between them. She wanted him to sweat, but she'd have to do better than that. Eventually, she continued, "Several illegal contraband were found, including several destroyed AIM parts. Not to mention the one in your arm." She nodded to his BISM causing Haruto to pull his arm back.

Shaking his head he replied, "Now, I personally fixed this up from pieces I found in the junkyard." Giving a dramatic pause, not to be out done by the Captain, he continued, "Come to think of it, I found all of those sensitive parts you're calling illegal from the junkyard. It's as if someone inappropriately disposed of them." Bring his hand to his chin in thought, he added, "It sounds like *those* people should be brought up on charges," Haruto's eyes found hers in challenge, "treason maybe for release of state secrets?"

The Captain moved her hand back quickly, which might as well have been her slamming down on the table in frustration. *'It looks like someone is finally losing her cool.'* He thought.

"You're free to go." She spoke as she moved back to the door, two other Keepers peeking into it. "And Cadet," She continued, "the Sakrá wants to speak with you, before you leave."

— 8 —

The chamber used as a waiting room in Tower One was as interesting as a blank wall. In fact, it might as well have been a blank wall, or at least four of them. No place to sit, no Halo screens for entertainment or just commercials. ‘*Man, I love to watch commercials.*’ Haruto thought as he began to hum the MINOS jingle.

Don’t you dare start that now. QB9 voice growled low in warning.

‘*Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hunger and stuff.*’ He thought back as he turned his mind away from his lunch options. ‘*Maybe I’ll get the old man to buy me something...*’

That includes thoughts of any kind of food, brat.

Haruto waved away QB9 comment with his hand as he leaned against one of the blank walls. With this much free time on his hands, and nothing to do with his imagination, he couldn’t help but think about something more troubling. He’d gotten picked up at his house. The old man had never allowed that before. But now... ‘*This sounds like a dangerous precedent.*’

You never did tell me who this ‘old man’ was. QB9 asked again.

Haruto considered the question, but before he could answer, a section

in the blank walls slide away as someone entered. ‘*No, not just someone.*’ Haruto thought. This *someone* he’d recognize anywhere.

“Hiya, Princess. They didn’t get you too?” He asked, “Just can’t imagine, you in the interrogation rooms.” He continued. ‘*Like, no one in their right mind would interrogate Kanopos’ princess.*’ Of course, he never said the Keepers were always in their *right* mind, so...

“Fortunately, no. Ghost Hacker,” she replied as she made her way towards him leaning on the wall next to him. “Although given your familiarity with the place it can’t be all that bad.”

Buzz. Buzz. Haruto’s BISM vibrated with a new message.

“Ghost Hacker? Never met the guy, or girl.” He added as he tilted his head down to look at his BISM, but a movement of the Princess’ hand stopped him. Haruto gave her a questioning look in return. Her cloudy eyes met his blue ones before turning to the room at large as if to say we are not alone.

“Perhaps you are correct.” She spoke aloud. “The Ghost Hacker would never have been caught.” She continued a hint of amusement coloring her words. Haruto rolled his eyes in return at the long standing joke they had.

Turning to the matter at hand, he had no idea how he was supposed to read her message without looking down at his BISM, and QB9 wasn’t being helpful either. ‘*What a surprise.*’ He thought sarcastically.

“The Ghost Hacker is a fairy tale Princess.” Haruto answered. “Us real folks have to interact with society.” He continued knowing she’d read

between the lines.

Buzz. Buzz. His BISM went off again, and now Haruto knew it was the Princess sending him messages. How, well he had no idea. Her hands were in sight laying against the wall behind her. For once not in her formal coveralls, something he knew her tutors and father would not have approved of.

When his eyes returned to hers, all he got in answer was a challenging look before her eyes drifted back to his BISM. “Perhaps, but I find the ability to be in more than one place essential for a Pilot.”

‘*Oh! Pilots, her AIM. Of course they can do hands free messaging.*’ Haruto looked at his own BISM with some heat. ‘*Well, that’s assuming they have a useful AIM.*’ QB9 didn’t so much as flinch at the comment.

I’m not a toy, brat. QB9 replied calmly.

‘*Yeah, a toy would at least be useful.*’ Haruto answered. Pausing for a split second he continued, ‘*Come on QB9, please.*’

There was another moment when Haruto was sure the AIM would ignore him, but a second later and words appeared in his left-hand vision.

MPrincess: I warned you not to get caught.

MPrincess: See, you figured it out.

Haruto shrugged as he changed the topic, “So not held against your will. Can’t imagine you’re here for the Keeper’s Famous hospitality.” In his head he continued, ‘*QB, how to do I reply?*’

Just think it and I'll do the rest, kid. QB9 replied helpfully as the Princess' lips tightened as she held back a smile.

GhostHacker: Princess meet QB9. The AIM with his own opinions on everything.

MPrincess: A pleasure, SB3-QB9.

"I've never had a problem with the hospitality." The Princess answered amusement tinging her voice. "Of course, I've always been on the right side of the interrogation rooms, so..."

MPrincess: Why that's very forward of you. But if Haru hasn't told you yet, then I'm not sure I should.

'Hey! What the heck are you asking her?'

Haru? QB9 questioned instead causing Haruto flush.

"Ha!" Haruto's bark laugh was more forced than it would have been otherwise. "You've got me there."

'You didn't answer the question.'

None of your business, pipsqueak. QB9 answered.

"I'm waiting for my Honorable Father." The Princess answered.

GhostHacker: Not the words I'd use to describe him.

MPrincess: Haruto...

“It would seem that the KANP incident had a very large reach. Although not the normal Ghost Hacker MO.” The Princess continued, a slight question in her voice.

GhostHacker: Blame that on QB9. Someone had to get sticky fingers.

Seeing as I have no fingers, I hardly see how that comparison is relevant.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I wish I could help, or I did before spending more than 16 hours in room 4.” Haruto replied aloud ignoring QB9.

MPrincess: Only 16? The Captain must be going soft.

Soft!? You call that soft? We’re starving here! QB9 complained.

In one smooth motion, the Princess reached into her coveralls and pulled out a protein bar.

“By the Gods, be praised!” Haruto praised in thanks as he ripped the bar out of it’s packaging and shoved it down his throat. “Mmmmmmmmm.”

MPrincess: I’m glad you like it.

“You’re welcome.” The Princess said aloud as she handed him another one. This one he ate slower.

Will wonders never cease. You do know how to chew. QB9 commented drily.

MPrincess: Although, if you hadn't gotten caught, you wouldn't have had to endure the standard enhanced interrogation tactics.

GhostHacker: I told him as much, but QB decided to suppress our hunger, which just made routine interrogation painful.

MPrincess: I didn't know AIMs could suppress hunger.

I'm hardly your average AIM. QB9 replied. The Princess nodded her head slightly in agreement.

GhostHacker: *Anyway.* I'll have you know we didn't get caught per se. The Guardians just showed up at my place.

MPrincess: I'm not surprised to hear that. Classified documents went missing.

If they didn't want it stolen, then Lieutenant Cho shouldn't have been linked to the secure database. QB9 responded. **They should be glad it was just us and not someone else taking advantage of his stupidity.**

MPrincess: I agree.

GhostHacker: Of course you do. You're not the one who had to waste nearly a day because your AIM couldn't stick to the unclassified stuff.

MPrincess: Somehow, I doubt SB3-QB9 instigated the KANP prank.

Haruto blushed as he started to lick the wrapper.

Ha! See not my fault. QB9 answered. **And don't lick the dang thing. Have some manners.**

MPrincess: I think I like SB3-QB9.

GhostHacker: You're not stuck with him every second of everyday.

“So eh...” Haruto began aloud not sure what he could say. The Princess just tilted her head slightly in response. Clearly not going to help. QB9 also seemed amused. “Yeah, speaking of KANP, you never...” Haruto cut himself off to rephrase his question, “I didn’t know you had an officer ranking already.”

GhostHacker: Do you even need to go to OCI?

“It’s ceremonial at best.” The Princess answered aloud.

MPrincess: Nothing has changed, Haru.

Changed? QB9 questioned.

“Ah, that’s too bad. I guess you can’t put in a good word for me, then?”

Haruto continued ignoring QB9 for the moment.

MPrincess: Perhaps you will be able to assist Haru in this endeavor.

GhostHacker: Later, Princess.

Later? Later what? QB9 demanded confused.

“After the KANP incident, I’m afraid my word would have little weight.”

The Princess answered.

MPrincess: And Uncle was extremely upset about the whole thing.

If you’re trying to look for alternatives, Haru, this is not the way.

“Now, I don’t know anything about this KANP incident talk. Must have missed all the excitement.” Haruto replied aloud.

GhostHacker: Was worth the shot.

The Princess sent an image of an eye roll.

“Even so, your reputation proceeds you. And unfortunately, solid recommendations are hard to give to a renown prankster.”

“Prankster? Me?” Haruto asked as he bat his eyes at her. “I’ve since changed my prankster ways. Now, I’m a serious KANP student.”

MPrincess: Laying it on thick, aren’t you?

“If that’s so, then I’m sure you’ll manage OCI on your own merits.” The Princess answered aloud.

You know, while this conversation’s all shooting stars and star bursts. What’s stopping you, oh so lofty Moon Princess, from telling on us. Classified documents and all. QB9 interrupted their banter.

GhostHacker: QB! How dare you!

The Moon Princess tilted her head in their direction clearly having received the message.

MPrincess: Haruto is my best friend. I trust him with my life.

GhostHacker: Hey, you don't have to explain anything to him.

Haruto was going to have words with the AIM later about his disrespect.

If you're such great friends, why are you hiding it now. QB9 challenged.

Before the Princess could respond, the wall panel slide open. "Kōtaishi," the biggest pain in Haruto's SKIM called out.

MPrincess: You're making that face again. Stop Haru. He's not that bad.

GhostHacker: Says you.

QB9's thoughts questioned their conversation, but the Princess soon answered it, "Honorable Father," she took her hands off the wall placing them in their place within her coveralls.

What kind of father calls his offspring by a title? QB9 questioned still confused.

GhostHacker: That asshole, that's who.

MPrincess: I'd like to remind you both that he is still my father.

"We don't have time for you to engage in ideal chic-chat." The cold man continued eyes already turned to the door. Haruto never seemed to exist with this man.

The Princess turned her head in Haruto's direction, "I'll see you around Haruto, but hopefully not here again." She called out easily causing a smile to appear on Haruto's lips.

Gento Yozora's eyes pierced Haruto as he waved goodbye.

MPrincess: And SB3-QB9, I never said for Haru to pretend we weren't friends. He did that on his own.

The connection dropped as his friend left. Leaving him red in the face.
'I swear she's got a game out of making me blush' He thought.

I hate to admit this, but she might be a keeper. QB growled in his head. **No, not that kind of Keeper, kid.** QB continued in Haruto's confusion. **You know what, never mind.**

Buzz. Buzz.

Opening the message normally, Haruto wasn't all that surprised to see that it was the Princess again.

MPrincess: One down, Haru.

QB9's confusion was palatable. Before Haruto could explain, the side panel reopened. Walking in was an elderly looking man in the ceremonial white coveralls of the Sakrá. The white cloth was layered in a flowing

garment that Haruto knew from experience hide body armor. Some of the most powerful on Kanopos, or so he was told.

“Haruto,” the Sakrá sighed as he took Haruto’s appearance in.

“I swear I didn’t do it, Gramps.” Haruto lied easily.

GRAMPS! Haruto flinched at the sound, which the old man seemed to take for something else. **The Sakrá is the old man!**

“Yes, I’m sure,” the Sakrá replied not even trying to hold his disbelief. Beckoning him out of the waiting room, they made their way out of Tower One. “What I’m not happy about is you being kicked out of KANP again. How will you become a Pilot if you don’t pass school?” The old man continued.

‘It’s really not that big of a deal, QB.’ Haruto answered the AIM as he kicked at the ground. He knew the speech that awaited him. He’d heard it hundreds of times now. Stay in school, don’t get into trouble, and study hard.

The leader of this rickety old ship is your Gramps. QB9 continued in a disbelieving tone. **That’s something you lead with.**

‘Yeah, well I don’t.’ Haruto replied in thought. QB9 growled in annoyance causing Haruto to stifle a sigh. *‘We’re not related by blood or anything, so really not that big a deal. Besides, I think you’ll prefer stuff about the Princess.’*

Why? Only one of us has a crush on her. QB9 replied.

‘First off, we’re friends. And second, the reason why I said our discuss-

sion earlier about OCI was pointless...' Haruto was interrupted by QB9.

This again, kid. QB9 started, **OCI is...**

'Will you just give me a second to explain.' Haruto waited for silence.

'It's pointless because I'm already planning to go.' He finished.

Then why... QB9 trailed off.

'I was bored and you just assumed.' Haruto answered.

Then you lied. QB9 answer bubbling up. **You do need OCI.**

'I didn't lie. I don't need OCI to become a Pilot.' Haruto continued over QB9's anger. 'But it is the only place me and the Princess can be partners together. We've been planning this since we were ten. That's what OCI means to me. To us.'

And one down? What's that supposed to mean? QB9 questioned.

'The test, the big bad final exam.' Haruto replied as he swung his feet at the floor as he followed the still lecturing Sakrá. 'There's two parts, well three, but I'm gifted at the simulators so.'

I'm for the Showcase. QB9 answered following the conversation. **A unique AIM.**

'Yeah, pretty much.' Haruto answered. 'That's why I made you anyway. To get into OCI, to become a Pilot.'

And the Practical. How will you pass that? QB9 questioned.

'That's part two, and I'm still working on that one.' Haruto replied. QB9 was contemplative at the answer. 'Hey now, make no mistake, even if this doesn't work I'm still going to become a Pilot and together the Ghost

Hacker and the Moon Princess will make history.'

There's three Pilots to a Unit, kid.

Haruto shrugged at the response, not really caring.

"And you haven't heard a word I've said, have you little Haruto?" The old man questioned as he smiled down on him.

Haruto smiled back sheepishly as he ran a hand through his hair. "Sorry Gramps. I guess I'm just too hungry to concentrate."

A light pat to his shoulder, "Why don't I take you to lunch. You can tell me how you've been. My treat."

"Woo hoo!" Haruto shouted as he jumped into the air taking the lead. He was going to get MINOS after all.

— 9 —

Exiting the high arches of Sanctuary Park's main entrance, Haruto dipped onto Shinodake Main, aka the northern section of Gento Sector. '*Better known as Prayer Alley, QB.*' Haruto spoke to his AIM as they continued to familiarize the AI with Kanopos proper.

I don't see the point of this running around. I have the layouts of the ship from public and KANP classified records. This is just excessive.

Haruto rolled his eyes before ducking down a side street. '*Was this on it?*' He questioned already knowing the answer. QB9's grumble brought a smile to Haruto's face. '*That's what I thought.*' He continued, but the prickle of QB9's frustration didn't go away, so he rephrased his response. '*Look QB, this ship, the great Kanopos, is just as alive as you are.*'

Some how I doubt that.' QB9 snapped back.

'*Well, not like that.*' Haruto sighed in reply. Some times QB9 was difficult just to be difficult. '*But the results are the same.*' He continued he feet running down another off the record back alley. '*Sections fall apart, Sectors grow, change, morph with the growing people who live in them.*'

Upgrades, legal and illegal both take up empty spaces creating new walkways in the process.’ Stopping above a grate he stomped on it, ‘And tunnels, all of which are illegal and 60% unaccounted for.’

Moving on he couldn’t help the love and appreciated he had for *his* ship. Each Sector was alive even if QB9 could never understand. It grow and shrank, changing to its own rhythm. Kanopos was *alive*. At least in all the ways that counted. And there was no one who knew it like he did. Not even the Princess with all her special access.

60%? How do you even know that? QB9 growled in frustration. Haruto blushed in response. **Of course it has to do with your Princess.**

At least someone is taking the security of this ship seriously.

‘Hey! Gramps does what he can, but he’s got bigger worries as do the Keepers. Besides, the tunnels are small and the majority of them have overheated since their creation.’ Haruto responded. He’d argued the same thing to the Princess. They’d come to a compromise. They didn’t give up his detailed knowledge of Kanopos, while he helped her generate up-to-date maps of the ship.

Why can’t I just use the Princess’ map? QB9 whined. **Then we can actually do something productive.**

‘Because the files are too big, and the transfer times are ridiculous.’ Haruto replied absentmindedly as he stopped by one of his old terminals long since decommissioned. *‘We can’t risk it.’*

Hump. QB9 replied as they entered silence. **I take it you used to play**

around here. Came his soft reply to unmasked nostalgia.

‘*Something like that.*’ Haruto replied as he turned down the street to a main road, Tōji Avenue. Taking in the large building he continued. ‘*I used to live here.*’

Solstice. One of the thirteen Gento sponsored Orphanages. QB9 supplied unnecessarily.

‘*You can’t imagine how much trouble I got into back in the day.*’ Haruto continued.

I supposed that explains why Sanctuary Park is the first place you take me too. QB9 replied.

Haruto ignored the tune. ‘*If you follow this street and take a left, small alley you can’t miss it, you’ll make it to Sanctuary Academy. Most of the Keeper brats end up there.*’ And if not for meeting the Princess, he’d probably have gone too. Maybe end up a Keeper, maybe not. The old man had been pushing KANP pretty heavily back then too.

Keeper brat? QB9 questioned, but before Haruto could answer he was interrupted by a familiar shout.

“Haruto? Hey!” Turning to the voice, Haruto was meet with an all to familiar face. “I figured you’d be hanging out with one of your fellow Cadets on your off day and not walking around the Sanctuary?” She questioned politely.

Haruto snorted in response. “And get teased endlessly about being the only Cadet *helping* with KANP security? The Gods help you, Naomi.” The

young woman smiled amusingly back at him.

“It’s an honor to get to serve so closely with the three DOMAINE High Commanders. The Sakrá surly smiles upon you Cadet *Hēidōng*.” The emphasize on his family name was part bitter, part longing.

Why? QB9 questioned. **You’re both orphans.**

‘More than that, we’re both Keeper brats.’ Haruto added. *‘But they call her Ensign Naomi for a reason.’* Haruto could still feel QB9’s confusion so he elaborated. *‘Most orphans are without a family name, QB.’*

I have no family name. That doesn’t make me any less than you.

QB9 replied sharply.

‘Not to me or the Princess, no. But she’ll never know her ancestors. Even you know that.’ Haruto wasn’t sure how he could explain more so instead he spoke to Naomi. “We both know me helping out at KANP six days out of the week isn’t an honor position. Maybe for a Techie like you, but for me?” Haruto shook his head. “The old man is unjustly punishing me. For a crime I didn’t commit!”

Naomi relaxed minutely showing she’d been a Keeper brat much longer than he had. “You mean a crime no one can *prove* you committed.” She corrected.

Haruto shrugged easily in response. “Same difference.”

“Still you ought to be grateful for the opportunity. Commander Lee is the top of her field.” Naomi continued.

“Yeah, I’m sure of it, but that doesn’t change the fact that all I’m

allowed to do is move some stuff around.” Haruto hopped in disbelief. “My genius wasted on manual labor!”

Naomi smiled openly, “Like anyone would let you near a terminal or console.”

Spreading out his arms as to say, what can you do about it, he turned his attention to Solstice. ‘*Still, it would have been nice to work with Commander Chinō instead. There was so much we could have done to help with cyber security.*’

I’m surprise you care so much. QB9 commented. **Doesn’t this mean we’ll have an easier time regaining access to the KANP system.**

‘*Yeah, but it’s not the same.*’ Aloud he spoke to Naomi, “Anyway, I thought you were from Wayward?”

“Mentorship program.” Naomi answered easily. “It’s still pretty new.”

Haruto looked at her in confusion. ‘*Then why haven’t I heard of it.*’

She continued before he could voice his thoughts. “I’m sure your reputation is why you haven’t been asked to join.”

Folding his arms across his chest, “I’d make a great big brother!” Puffing up he chest he continued. “Us Keeper brats got to stick together.”

Naomi let out an undignified snort, “You barely count.”

“I’ll have you know, I’ve probably spent more time with the Keepers than even a Keeper Cadet.” He countered with a large grin.

A full laugh escaped from Naomi’s reserve stance, “I bet you have.” There was a small pause before she continued, “What are you doing today,

anyway? You're going in the wrong direction for Sanctuary Park."

Ask her directions to a place of knowledge gathering. QB9 replied.
The Princess wasn't sure which Archives was open access. And I don't want to have to go by all of them.

Haruto's lips tensed. *He'd* not been apart of that conversation, which meant QB9 was talking to *his* best friend without him.

Oh get over it. We need to study if we're going to make it into OCI, and I don't see you seeking out the information. QB9 paused for a split second. **Honestly, I'm not sure we'll be able to do it using the Princess' curriculum.**

"Actually," Haruto spoke aloud admitting defeat to QB9, "I'm looking for, well like a place to study and like get knowledge and stuff." He trailed off uncertain. '*There's got to be a place like that, yeah?*'

Naomi raised an eyebrow all other facial features like worked steel. "You mean a library?"

"A what?" Haruto questioned. Even QB9 seemed stumped by the term. The confusion lining his face caused a glint to appear in Naomi's eyes.

"Dear Goddess. You better hope this Pilot stuff works out for you, because you'd make a poor Techie."

Haruto blushed at the comment, his lips jutted in a pout, which just caused Naomi's lips to turn into a slight smile. "Do you know a place or not?"

"Of course I do," she replied wiping the smile from her lips, but her

eyes still held lingering amusement. Bumping his BISM with her own, she blinked into a frown. “By the Goddess, what type of encryption do you have on this thing?”

Haruto ignored the question. ‘*QB, could you open a link, please.*’ QB9 grumbled but opened the link without any fuss. The Princess might be on to something with this being nice to the AIM thing.

Naomi eyed him, but her fingers tapped on her BISM all the same. “Here, the coordinates to KOAL. Honestly, though you should already have it’s location on file. It is, after all the biggest library on Kanopos.”

“Thanks,” he muttered as QB9 showed him the location.

“It’s a great place to study. Just be careful. The old woman guarding the place isn’t one to cross. We’re all pretty sure she’s a retired Guardian or something.” Naomi warned.

Haruto waved her off as he turned to leave, he knew how to handle Guardians. “Have fun baby sitting.”

“Good luck, Haruto. We’re all routing for you.” Her eyes saying what he already knew. Keeper brat or not, if he made it into OCI, he’d be the first orphan to do so in more than a decade.

Haruto gave her two thumbs up before disappearing into the nearby alleyway. ‘*Yeah, no pressure.*’

— 10 —

Kanopos Open Access Library was hard to miss. In fact, Haruto had passed it a bunch of times on his way to and from KANP. Or at least when he wasn't running late and could take Main.

When are you ever *not* running late, kid? QB9 added sarcastically.

Haruto flushed in embarrassment at the realization he'd not passed it once since obtaining the AIM. '*This week's been rough.*' He replied.

QB9 gave an undignified snort in response. **How did you not know about this building?**

'I don't usually use the front door to public buildings, QB.' Haruto replied as he started towards said front door. Even now, it felt wrong. But that might have had more to do with the look of the building.

Look?

'I've been banded from all public Farms, since I was eleven. I thought this was one of them.' He continued in thought. Given the size of it, he would have been hesitant to break his band for a Farm.

Farms? QB9 questioned bring up an image of the Krai's breeding Nags.

'No, not that kind of farm. A Console Farms.' Haruto paused a meter

from the door to pull up an image for QB9 to review. ‘*Buildings with wall to wall Halo screens and virtual consoles. Lockers of some really impressive tech, tablets with more power than the basic KANP stuff I get assigned.*’

The image went blank as QB9’s attention returned to Haruto. **Do I even want to know how an eleven year old gets banded from all these so called Farms?**

‘*Too much imagination.*’ Haruto supplied as he continued towards the door. At QB9’s annoyance he elaborated. ‘*I accidentally uploaded a virus to the network. And let’s just say Gramps wasn’t too happy that he had to replace a tenth of the Kanopos operational network.*’

QB9 snorted in mild approval. Standing in front of the KOAL doors, Haruto was surprised when they slide open for him. ‘*I guess this really isn’t a Farm.*’ Haruto thought as his eyes found the bio-scan from habit.

Walking into the building expecting at any moment for an alarm to go off, Haruto hesitantly took in his surrounds. A handful of Halo screens, plenty of desk space and access lines. But several sections seemed to be dark with **Down for Maintenance** signs plastered in front of them.

‘*Well this is a little bit of a let down.*’ Haruto thought feeling QB9’s silent agreement as he continued into the building properly passing the front desk without a backwards glance.

“And just where do you think you’re going, Cadet Héidòng?” An aging woman with sharp eyes peered at him from behind specs. A crooked, wrinkled finger pointed in his direction stopping him in his tracks.

'Like who even wears specs these days?' Haruto questioned in surprise. Eye sight could be fixed in half a second.

"We don't have anything for you to steal and this building has the highest security of all Archival spaces."

Haruto looked around again spotting only second rate surveillance tech. '*Sure, and I'm a lost Prince.*' He thought sarcastically, QB9's amusement lingered at the back of his mind. "Then it's a good thing I'm here to learn." Haruto replied as he continued on his way.

"Not so fast." She continued directing him to her desk at the front. "If you're really here to *study* then you'll have register your BISM for access."

"Ah... okay." Haruto walked hesitantly to her desk her eyes gleaming like a predatory.

"And you'll need to sign, these, read these, and complete several tests about proper KOAL usage." Her eyes glanced at him. "And that's assuming you only want archival access." Batting her eyes challenging, a dark smile crossed her lips.

"Ah..." '*You've got to be kidding me.*' Haruto thought as his eyes glanced at the dense text of just once of the documents placed in front of him.

Just do it kid. QB9 encouraged lightly.

'Easy for you to say. You're not the one signing your soul to this she-devil.' Haruto countered eyeing the paperwork as if it were cursed by Tsukiyomi himself. And if any fairy tale hand taught him anything, it was never to make a deal with the devil.

“Of course,” the old woman purred, “If that’s too much work for you. You know the way out.”

A frown touched Haruto’s lips at the woman’s trumpet. As if a little paperwork would be enough to send him away. Pulling the documents to him, he set to work. ‘*QB9 reads these, and makes sure everything’s on the up and up.*’ He demanded with no complaint from the AIM. He’d never backed down from a challenge and he wasn’t going to start today.

Two hours later and Haruto was done with the ridiculous tests and paperwork. Pulling his BISM from the registration system, Haruto stared down the old woman daring her to deny him entry now. “And remember *Cadet*, if you so much as blink in the wrong way. Not even the Sakrá will be able to save you.”

“Blinking’s not against the rules.” Haruto snapped back at her as he hurried away. ‘*Remind me to prank her later, QB.*’

With pleasure.

They walk over to a desk and Haruto takes out his KANP tablet and hooks it up to an access point. Signing into the KOAL network too nearly all day. But the real kicker was trying to access the archives.

‘*This is ridiculous.*’ Haruto thought.

It’s not that bad. QB9 answered.

‘*This connection speed is a joke.*’ Haruto

QB9 was silent for a moment, **I’ve tested it, and it should be fine.**

How many firewalls does your tablet have?

'Not that many.' Haruto placed the tablet down on the table. With a sigh he continued. *'But the wireless adapter is ancient in this thing.'*

Console? Looking over, while the place wasn't wall to wall, it was pretty busy. **There in the back.** Haruto turned his head in the direction QB9 indicated.

A set of four consoles were completely undisturbed despite the busy place. It was odd. *'Perhaps they're broken.'* Walking over to them, Haruto sat in the farthest one and logged on. Fractions of a second later and he was staring at the archives home page.

"By the Gods," Haruto cursed as he sat down fully. *'That has got to be the fastest connection time, I have every had the pleasure of using.'* Haruto looked around at the rest. All state of the art, maybe even beta type machines.

QB9 voiced Haruto's question, **I'm not sure why these aren't being used. They're clearly the best this library has to offer.**

'Gift horse, QB.' Haruto replied as he downloaded the Princess' curriculum to get started.

What's that supposed to mean, kid?

'Beats me,' Haruto thought turning his focus on the console. *'The Princess said it once, even explained it. But it started with a battle so I tuned it out.'*

QB9 tisted in annoyance. **Of course you did.**

Haruto sighed at the dense text in front of him. At least it was in the

common tongue, but the Gods only knew how he'd rather be playing or chatting with the Princess.

Focus kid. QB9 commanded.

'Easy for you to say, apparently you talk to the Princess all the time without me.' Haruto whined.

You know we can't now. There's no point in senseless whining.

Haruto grumbled but nodded all the same. QB9 was right, the Princess was busy preparing for her big trip. *'I still don't see why she's got to be gone for so long. Her dad's just punishing us, again.'*

You should be glad it's only six months. A full trip through the Empire can take years.

'Not helping, QB. Not helping.' The last thing Haruto needed was for her old fart of a dad to keep her off ship for that long. Official transmissions sucked. They took ages and were always screened before hand. What if he did an awesome prank? How was he supposed to fill her in? What if her dad bored her to death? How was he supposed to distract her?

The Princess is made of tougher stuff than that. You'll both be fine. QB9 countered interrupting his death spiral. **Besides, this way you'll actually stick to a studying schedule.**

Looking at the dense text, he wasn't sure about that.

* * * * *

'Why would anyone need to know trade agreements for the Kanopos Clans?' Haruto questioned as he skipped the rest of the document.

She is a Clan heir. QB9 supplied, but Haruto could feel his slight desperation at their situations. QB9 couldn't seem to help but pull up the study guide, which was just a condensed list of everything the Princess had learned in the last four plus years that she thought might be KANP related. Haruto knew for a fact she'd taken out all of her internal Clan politics. She'd ranted at him enough about it that he was sure he could recite the dynamics and their origins in his sleep.

'*What are we going to do, QB?*' Haruto asked as he scrolled down the document. '*We don't have...*'

Haruto's thoughts were interrupted by the harsh sound of his name from a familiar voice. "Hēidòng."

Blinking up in confusion, Haruto spotted Helian Aeliana standing beside him looking unusually annoyed. '*Does she want something?*' He thought as he voiced the question. "Helian? You need something?" He asked.

Wasn't her hair silver earlier this week? QB9 questioned. As the fellow Cadet's bright pink hair.

'*I told you she changes hair colors faster than her mood swings.*' Haruto thought. "And clearly her mood has changed." He commented under his breath at the increasingly annoyed look crossing the girl's face.

"You're sitting at my console." She replied tensely arms crossed. "Surely you wondered why no one was sitting at it?"

Haruto looked around at the empty seats next to him, before looking back at the annoyed girl. '*She can't be serious.*' "Ah..." He started to reply,

but QB9 interrupted him.

Don't be stupid brat. She's the Guild heir, try not to insult her.

'Try not to... QB, there are three seat next to me. She can use one of those.' Haruto countered.

Boy, you must be a fool. Haruto went to correct him, but QB9 talked over him. **State-of-the-art equipment. Everyone else is using the old versions. Everyone else.**

Haruto looked again at the other occupants logged on to different consoles. *'So what? I'm just supposed to give up the console because she's having a bad day.'*

Yes. QB9 continued over Haruto's objectives. **Think of it this way, we move to the next seat, and she doesn't use mommy and daddy to get us kicked out.** QB9 paused to let the thought sink in. **Think carefully, kid.**

Haruto nodded minutely as he turned back to the console to log off. Hopping off the seat, he moved to the console next to it hoping Helian hadn't claimed them all. When she made no move to stop him, he relaxed and logged in to the new console. "All yours." He called over his shoulder as she seemed frozen to the spot.

At his voice, Helian settled down next to him so Haruto went back to work. *'You think there's some way to use those KANP documents you liberated to cross-references the Princess' study guide?'* He questioned as he began the process of generating all of his previous archive searches.

Not without sending all kinds of alerts. QB9 answered. At his unspoken thoughts he continued. **And I can't use the network at home or the GH network either. The Keepers will pick up even the hint of those document signatures.**

‘Well dang.’ Haruto thought as he continued to bring up window after window. Beside him, he was a little surprised to hear nothing but even breathing. Helian was well known for her study habits. She also happened to be ranked first in their Cadet class in just about every category.

“You just going to stare at the screen all day?” Haruto questioned as his fingers flew across his keyboard absentmindedly. “’Cause that would make me moving kinda pointless.”

What are you thinking kid? You’re all over the place. QB9 questioned.

‘I can’t just be friendly?’ Haruto thought. QB9 answered with palatable disbelief.

“I’m just thinking.” Helian answered.

Haruto snorted in reply, “What do you even need to study for anyway?” He continued. “Don’t you already know it all?”

“I’ve never claimed to know everything.” She snapped in frustration. “*Some* of us have to study and review to even have a chance at getting into OCI.” She continued with a bite that surprised him, “We can’t all be born into a *Clan*.”

Haruto shrugged in response grateful for once that QB9 was letting his

mind run wild. The frustration Helian expressed wasn't new, but for the first time he really took a look at it. Her. She had a desperation about her that was surprisingly familiar. Even so, he had doubts that her concerns were real. "You all seem the same to me with the only exception I find being the Princess. But you're no Moon Princess, are you, Helian?"

At her silence, he looked over at her briefly to see her lost in thought. Searching.

What makes you think she'll help us? QB9 questioned.

'Because if she's truly worried about getting into OCI. Ranked number one in our class, and all. Then it's because she's not from a Clan, QB.'

The Showcase? QB9 questioned as Haruto turned back to his screen.

You think we could help?

'I made you didn't I?' Haruto replied.

"Thanks." She called out abruptly.

For what? You didn't do anything?

'Didn't I?' Haruto countered as she moved to type on the screen. "No problem." The Princess called him a conductor of light all the time. But QB9 still scoffed at his thoughts. *'You got to understand people, QB.'* He told the AIM. To Helian, he continued "Besides, I could tell you were having a bad day."

"Can I ask why you're even here?" She questioned hesitantly. "I mean, not to sound rude, but you've never taken your studies seriously before, so..." She trailed off the question obvious in her voice.

What are you doing here?

And for once, it was a question he would gladly answer. With a large grin in place, he held up a finger, “First off, if you’ve got to say ‘not to be rude’, then you’re definitely about to be rude.”

Kid, really? Now’s the time when you want to joke.

‘Everyone likes a good joke, QB. Everyone.’ Haruto replied with an even wider grin. Holding up another finger he continued. “And second,” he paused for dramatic effect as if sharing a secret. “I’ve got to get into OCI, too.”

“You? OCI?” She questioned. His smile turned mischievous at her doubt.

“Yup!” Turning back around he started typing once again, “No matter what it take!”

Not even a half a second later, she spoke again. “You’d need a 92% on the next six ranking exams to break even. And that’s assuming they don’t raise the test score average from 70% to 75%.”

Did she just calculate all of that in her head? QB9 sounded impressed. Haruto grinned even wider, his smile recognizing a kindred spirit. “Whatever it takes, right?”

Helian shook her head in disbelief, but a small smile found its way to her lips. “Yeah, whatever it takes,” she parroted softly, but Haruto knew he just might have found his answer.

If there was anyone who knew the KANP curriculum it would be Helian.

And it would seem they had a similar goal in mind.

QB9 chuckled darkly as Haruto begin to skim the next article. The Princess would be proud.

Part II

The Hēidòng Effect

— 11 —

“And now I have to deal with the change in flotilla.” Ilia sighed. “If I have to hear Kur-ram complain one more time about the ceremony, I’m going to strangle him.” Hand motion.

“You say that all the time.” Aeliana

Ilia bumped into Aeliana gentle. A bush of SKIM to SKIM that always set Aeliana’s senses tingling. “And it just feels like Father wants me to trail him during all of my free time. Like being Clan head is all that difficult...”

Aeliana tuned out the majority of Ilia’s rant. For the pass week, she’d heard a variation of the same thing. Ilia was lementing not having any free time to go to the movies or the theater. Aeliana would push back with how she didn’t have much time either with her own Father’s expenditure. Ilia would go on some more about how difficult it was to be in a Clan, and would add some of handed comment about how lucky Aeliana was not to be in one.

Honestly, she preferred lunch. An embargo on Clan talk and the like. But this was a part of her girlfriend duties. Nodding along, Aeliana’s thoughts turned to her own father.

Insert stuff from original -also look up flotilla talk with Kur-ram...

(Chapter 3)

Her thoughts go back to map coordinates for relics. If her father insisted on going out into a nebula, she might as well get something out of it.

After talking with Heidong, she'd been chasing down relics...

'*Moon Princess*.' She thought absentmindedly. For all of Haruto's talk about being best friends with the Gento heir, he'd had a point about that. As antiquated as it was, the ZenkZ-D that the Kōtaishi would inherit was a modified version of the original gift from the Goddess. Or so it was told.

No matter the origins of the machine, it could not be denied that it was a relic. Two such relics on Kanopos in fact. Both belonging to the Gento clan. Aeliana had found memories of the ceremonial serving of the General. Unlike the Moon Princess with its limited updates to keep it from being completely out-dated. The General was still in its original form.

As such, it never saw real battle. Was rolled out only once a cycle for the annual Gento Festival.

It was that uniqueness that she craved. With only two working ZenkZ relics, if she could somehow utilize the ancient technology she'd have a showcase like no other.

'A thought that would never have occurred to me before Heidong.'

A gentle bump caught Aeliana's attention. "And you're not listening to a word, I'm saying. Are you Aeli?" Ilia smiled.

Aeliana flushed in embarrassment having been caught, "Sorry, Ilia. My

mind was else where."

Ilia shakesThey were the answers to her problem of uniqueness for her showcase... potentially at least. -small about of background on relics, linked to the Moon Princess and the Gento...

Ilia pulls them aside into a cove... calls Aeliana out on not paying attention...

-some banter, but you've heard this a million times now...-Ilia
Aeliana still apologizes...

— 12 —

Greeeeeeeee. Pew!

A large rail gun shots across the Halo image displayed on his tablet destroying battle ships with only a handful of fires. The weapon was nearly as large as the ZenKZ controlling it. Single barreled, with dozens of rings blazing colors of red, orange and yellow after each fire.

Kaboom!

Haruto had never had so much excitement with reading history notes.

The battle before him pause with battleship in split in half and melted metal everywhere. A picture of a middle-aged woman overlayed the dying ships. Something Haruto was still getting used too.

My name is Captain Shihou Lin and I am the creator of the original rail gun. The woman began. She moved to continued to speak, but frozen in place as Aeliana's voice cut in.

'Ah, just when it was getting good. Aeliana has the worst timing.'
Haruto thought with mild disappointment.

Before going into the details of the rail gun, it is important to understand the history surrounding... Her voice droned on, and

on, and *on*.

A sharp pain jolted him awake. Blinking around, Aeliana's voice was still in the background talking about famine or something like that.

'I haven't missed anything.' He complained.

You will if you don't focus, kid. Focus. QB9 growled out.

'Yeah, yeah.' Haruto thought back as he tried to focus on the extra material. He'd talked with Aeliana enough to know that her lecture voice, a bland monotone, could cure insomnia. Another jolt forced him to pay a little more attention. Another thing he was learning was that Aeliana was unnecessarily thorough about *everything*.

Haruto wasn't sure how much time had passed as Aeliana continued to talk, while Haruto stared at the frozen face of the amazing Captain Shihou. What he did know was that QB9 had jolted him awake some six, *zip*, seven times now.

With a scowl, Haruto disconnected his BISM from the tablet immediate stopping Aeliana's boring lecture voice. He ought to be thankful, really considering he could still be going over pointless trade agreements and Kanopos Clan history if he'd been using the Princess' notes. But all he wanted was to listen to the original lecture notes without an additional ten hours of *extras*.

Don't be so dramatic, kid. It's more like 4 to 1. QB9 corrected.

'Like that makes it any better?' Haruto replied leaning back in his seat.

Aeliana huffed in annoyance at the action. "You can't just give *up!*"

She whispered fiercely. “We’ve just barely started.”

“I’m not giving up!” Haruto replied without bothering with the fake whisper. He hated it when anyone accused him of throwing in his chips. He was just taking a break. ‘*Yeah, just a long break.*’

For the rest of the day, brat? QB9 questioned. **That’s not called a break.**

‘*I’ll get on it tomorrow, which is more than I used to do. So, a break.*’ Nodding to himself he caught Aeliana’s rolling her eyes.

A loud cough caused Haruto to look up as the old hag at the front desk stared down her nose at him. “Volume!” She snapped in a severe whisper.

“*Volume.*” Haruto mimicked her under his breath as she turned back to her work. ‘*What does she have, ear enhancements or something?*’ He didn’t care what QB9 said, she was out to get him, personally.

“And you can’t throw a fit, just because it’s a little harder than you like.” Aeliana continued as if the old woman wasn’t discriminating against him.

“I am not throwing a *fit.*” He responded arms crossed defensively.

QB9 snorted in amusement. **The girl has a point, kid. If you could just focus. You could get through this section on rail guns. It’s interesting enough to keep even your attention.**

‘*I’m going to pretend like that wasn’t an insult.*’ Haruto replied.
I’m just saying it how I see it. QB9 commented neutrally. **Even the Princess seems to agree with me in that last correspondence.**

Haruto let a frown touch his lips. ‘*One, I told you to stop adding sections to my letters. And two, she didn’t say she agreed. Just that my attention span can sometimes be short. SOMETIMES.*’ Haruto corrected.

Sorry, to burst your bubble, kid. But she was just being polite. QB9 added.

Throwing his hands in the air, Haruto let out a frustrated sigh. ‘*You’re all out to get me!*’

“You done throwing a fit, now?” Aeliana questioned bluntly. Haruto flushed in response. “You have got to tell me who you’re talking to all this time.” She continued as her eyes scanned her own tablet. “It can’t be the Kōtaishi, she off ship.” She added under her breath, but loud enough for Haruto’s sharp ears to pick it up.

Ignoring the question having no intention of introducing QB9 to another of his friends. Instead, he asked one of his own. “Why do I even need to know any of this?” It was low enough that the old hag only gave him a harsh look. In his head he continued to QB9, ‘*I’m doing significantly better. Even you have to admit that.*’ Who knew showing up for exams could exponentially improve his scores?

You’re still underachieving. QB9 replied easily.

At the same time, Aeliana sighed in her reply. “I don’t know how many times I have to say this, but each lesson builds on the last. You can’t just learn the new stuff without context.”

‘*Context, context, context.*’ Haruto thought bitterly.

And if you don't get better with that context, I'm taking care of it. QB9 warned.

Haruto chose to ignore him, “Can’t we move on to something else?” Haruto tried to change the topic having already asked if Aeliana had non-annotated notes he could listen to, which she didn’t. If anything, he might at least get a working break. “Like that relic stuff, you’re working on for your Showcase. Are you getting anywhere with that?”

Disconnecting from her own tablet, Aeliana gave another long sigh. They’d studied long enough together over the past six months for her to know he was pretty much done for the day. Honestly, he didn’t know *how* she did this for hours on end. Thirty minutes was exhausting for him, and they’d been at it for more than an hour now.

Barely 75 minutes, kid. Normal people can do that just fine. QB9 added.

‘Normal? Normal is over-rated.’ Haruto replied.

Not this kind of normal. QB9 countered. **There's got to be medicine to fix your attention span...** QB9 added softly. Haruto wasn’t worried though. Without a body, QB9 could do very little on his own. And the Princess was unlikely to help either. A smug feeling filtered through him causing Haruto to frown.

‘On second thought, maybe I should start check my MINOS.’ He thought. The last thing he needed was unnecessary meds slowing his mind down.

“Nothing yet, as you very well know I’m waiting for my dad to return

with one, which should be any day now.” Aeliana replied interrupting his thoughts. Haruto pushed her spare tablet back to her so she could pack that too.

‘*And who needs a backup, anyway?*’ He thought. “Overachiever.” He muttered under his breath.

“At least I’m achieving *something*.” Aeliana replied without looking up.
“Did you bring those parts we talked about?”

Haruto winched at the comment as he hastily looked around, the old woman seemed to be annoying someone else for the moment so they were fine. This time, at least. ‘*For a Guild member, she sure is sloppy.*’ Haruto thought.

If she's asking you to get those parts, I hardly think she's Guild proper. QB9 commented.

Haruto shook his head in confusion, but turned his attention back to Aeliana. “What have I told you about talking about this stuff *here*?” He replied in a harsh whisper.

“Do you have it or not?” She questioned impatience leaking into her voice.

“What you got a hot date or something?” Haruto countered. Aeliana just kept staring at him. With a large sigh, he looked to make sure no one was looking in their direction, before pulling out a spare electronics pouch from his SKIM. Aeliana was nice and all, but times like these really showed her lack of self-preservation. Of course, the likelihood any Keeper would

arrest *her* was laughable. ‘*About as likely as the Princess getting searched, I guess.*’ Haruto thought as he handed it over.

“Sorry, it’s been a stressful week.” She replied as she took the pouch, placing it immediately in her kit with the rest of her things.

“Sure.” Haruto shrugged at the omission.

Trouble in paradise? QB9 commented.

‘*Probably.*’ Haruto thought. Aeliana’s relationship with the Amur heir was more often than not contentious. But, more importantly, an unwelcome topic of conversation. Instead, he focused on the slightly more concerning request. “Why’d you even need that stuff anyway?” The question seemed to pull the Aeliana out of her own thoughts.

“Huh?” She replied clearly only half listening.

Gesturing wildly to her kit, he continued in as low a voice as he could manage. “You know triggers like these only work for...” Looking around he attempted to lower his voice further, “*blasters.*” ‘*Which everyone knows is completely illegal to own. So what could she possibly want with them.*’

Obviously, she’s planning to kill someone. QB9 answered easily. **Or I suppose protect herself.** He added reluctantly.

Haruto tried not to look worried. He made his home in the Lower Level, and he knew for a fact that the Guild Princess didn’t need protection. Messing with the Helian family was a death wish. At least physically. The Princess mentioned trade agreements every once in a while that didn’t sound favorable to the Guild masters.

"Thanks for getting this stuff." Was her only reply.

Haruto held back a sigh. He'd asked the same thing to her when she'd asked for them with no response. He'd been tempted to tell her no. Sure he'd done felony worthy stuff in the past.

Daily if we count the GH network. QB9 added helpfully.

'Okay, so I do felony worth stuff all the time, but even I don't normally travel that section of Blue Sector in LL.' Haruto shivered at the memory. Bad stuff happened there all the time. And the Gods knew that an orphan like him going missing, probably wouldn't have kicked up much of a fuss.

If we told her how much work it was, we could get a nice favor out of it. QB9 suggested.

'No. It isn't worth mentioning the trouble...'

QB9 interrupted him, **Danger.**

Haruto rolled his eyes at the correction, *'I'm not going to mess with a good thing.'* He continued. *'And QB, this is a really good thing.'* Feeling QB9's resignation let Haruto relax a little.

'This is a good thing.' He repeated to himself. Aeliana wasn't just letting him use her spare tablet - an XP3 model that was like a million times better than anything the Academy had or he could hope to afford - she had also given him her backup notes. Notes that went as far back as their first days at KANP. Of course she didn't trust him to not break her tablet, but baby steps. *'And her notes are really thorough, even if they are boring.'*

Not that you've read all of them. QB9 replied.

'You try sitting through an hour of Aeliana drone on and on about famine or something.' Haruto shot back.

I did. All of it. QB9 replied cockily.

'Well, then I've got nothing to worry about then.' Haruto thought back, but he knew what QB9 was getting at. Ever since their new Lieutenants had arrived, things had been different. And he just wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. Lieutenant Sang-eo had installed a very impressive jammer that he turned on to the highest possible setting even on the small quizzes.

'I mean, military grade jamming systems are just overkill.' He thought, but QB9's appreciation was palatable, which caused Haruto to grudgingly admit he shared it. That and it seemed like the guy knew Lower Level like the back of his hand. Lieutenant Sang-eo had found all of his class ditching hiding places within the first week. How was a guy supposed to relax under those conditions?

You should be in class anyway. QB9 replied without sympathy.

Haruto wasn't sure he agreed, but it hardly mattered. The point, which had gotten lost somewhere, was that with that stupid jammer, he couldn't communicate well with QB9. And while they were working on a solution, even Haruto had to admit it could take him months, maybe even a full year, to come up with a work-around. Military jammers like that being just old school enough that hacking physically was out of the question.

At least that other kid's symbiote can't just sit on his shoulder anymore. QB9 commented.

‘Seo-Jun’s test scores aren’t going to help me.’ Haruto replied hotly only for QB9 to seemingly shrug his rage off.

“Hey, hey, *hey!*” Came an insistent whisper. Blinking up he was surprised to see Aeliana standing next to him. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for like five minutes.” She continued, her hands firmly on her hip as she stared him down with a patented Helian glare.

“Uh, sorry?” Haruto replied as he also stood to leave.

“Honestly, I don’t know why I put up with you.” She replied as they made their way out of KOAL. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who you were talking too this time?” She continued just as softly.

“Just thinking about the new Lieutenants.” Which was technically correct, not that he was completely sure how he felt about Lieutenant Yú.

“Well, I for one like them. Lieutenant Sang-eo treats everyone the same regardless of Clan status.” She continued in her uppity voice. Haruto was learning to just ignore it.

“And Yú?”

“Lieutenant Yú.” She flashed his a disapproving look, which he also ignored. If he took every disapproving look seriously, he’d probably have zero self-esteem. “Anyway,” she continued, “I’m not sure about him yet.”

‘Probably because he likes to brown nose you too,’ he thought. But aloud he said, “Well, I can’t complain too much. Neither has kicked me out of

class yet, so improvement all around.” He replied in full voice earning a harsh shush from the front desk.

Aeliana gave him a withering look, before sending an apologetic smile at the old hag. Haruto could really care less.

At the door to the library, Aeliana turned to him. “Hey, you want to get lunch. I know this great place just down the street.”

QB9 suppressed a rising swell of hunger. “Nah, I’m good.” He replied. Aeliana’s tastes ran a little on the expensive side. And when he said a little he really meant a *lot*. As there was one shop he could afford in Solas, and it wasn’t anywhere near the plaza. “Besides, I figured you’d want to eat with Amur.”

“No, she’s busy.” The disappointed look on her face made him almost regret the decision. “Clan stuff.” She added her eyes looking far into the distance before returning to him. A large fake smile in place. “Well another time, then.” She turned immediately and started down toward the center of Solas.

Haruto wasn’t sure if she was going to go to the food place or to her home. Either way, there was nothing for him in that direction. Taking a back alley, he ran up to the rooftop.

You should just tell her we can’t afford those places. QB9 replied.

‘Yeah, but it’s kinda embarrassing.’ Haruto replied as he began an aimless walk along the rooftops. His thoughts drifted to what he could afford to eat. His own food supplies running dangerously low, he knew he’d have

to prepare for a food run sooner rather than later.

And some more seeds. QB9 added. **Fresh vegetables will make my job easier.**

Haruto ignored him, his garden still had several hybrid tomatoes on the vine. Not to mention he didn't really have a place to put more potted plants. But it was more than that as the smells of street vendors assaulted his sensitive nose. Real fancy food just sounded better than tomatoes that were probably nothing like the original fruit that bore their name. And wouldn't it be nice to enjoy something he didn't have to cook?

'I really should just tell her.' Haruto thought. To enjoy the company of someone who could appreciate the subtle flavors of a good meal. It was times like this when the thought of his empty apartment was more than a little depressing. With the Princess off ship, life on Kanopos was just a little duller.

She'll be back any day now, kid. QB9 interrupted his thoughts.

'It's still been months!' Haruto complained. *'A guy's allowed to be upset about that. I mean how long does it take to tour the Empire?'*

Properly? QB9 commented as a galactic map appeared in Haruto's vision causing him to miss a step. **About 26 months, so you ought to be glad she's mostly just visiting Jade Empire nobles.** QB9 replied.

'It's still not fair.' Haruto replied an anger pout on his face.

Neither is begin stuck with an overgrown child all day, but I manage. QB9 countered.

Plopping down on a nearby rooftop, he wasn't surprised to find himself in Prayer Alley. This part of the ship always seemed to bring peace to his racing thoughts. The sounds of the humming ship replaced by birds and four legged animals from the nearby park. A safe haven to both him and the animals it housed.

'And maybe I'll see her today.' Haruto thought as he stared down at the quite streets below.

Kid, she promised to message us when she returned. QB9 replied quietly.

'Yeah, sure.' Haruto replied listlessly. The Princess would get to him when she could. But experience told him that could be days after her return. Tatsuki, her faithful retainer, was known to guard her every step for days after her return to Kanopos. And if there was one person the Princess had yet to get away with messaging him while in their presences, it was Tatsuki.

A few days won't kill us. QB9 commented.

Haruto didn't dignify the comment with a response. Instead, he looked out over the northern section of Sanctuary Park and the surrounding quiet streets within Prayer Alley. At this time of day, few people were out and about. And of those that were, the majority held the quiet bearings of the Gento Clan. But not *his* Gento.

Disappointed, Haruto forced his eyes away from every shadowy figure to the elegant path of a bird in flight. Its feathers were vividly colored

and it's beak longer than normal. '*Must be a new breed.*' He thought as he watched it play with the other birds in the Park.

He wasn't sure how much time passed before QB9 broke the silence.
Hey kid. He began. **Why don't we go to that MINOS stand for lunch?**
Treat yourself today.

'*Yeah, sure. Why not?*' Haruto thought as he stood up brushing off imaginary dust. There was always a chance that tomorrow would be the day. The Princess would eventually have to come home.

Movement out of the corner of his eyes of long flowing hair catch his attention. "No, it can't be?" He said aloud, racing swiftly in the direction of familiar formal coveralls. Only one person in the Gento Clan was allowed to wear both white and black, and she was his best friend.

A smile broke out as he walked quietly above along the rooftops. '*See, I told you I'd find her.*' Haruto didn't wait for a response before sending her a welcome home message.

GhostHacker: Welcome home Princess!

GhostHacker: For a second there, I was starting to think your old man wasn't every going to let your resurface.

Looking over to his best friend for a response, his eyes catch another familiar figure. '*Ah man, Tatsuki's on guard duty. It'll be ages before she response now.*' Haruto thought.

You should have just waited for her to message us. QB9 commented.

Now, I've got to live with you whining all day about it.

Before Haruto could make himself scarce, Tatsuki's head snapped up in his direction. Haruto flushed, but held her eyes at her disapproving look. Just to stick it to her, he waved with a wide grin. '*Well, we're caught now.*' Haruto thought. The short look the Princess gave her Head Retainer made Haruto sure, his friend had come to the same conclusion.

MPrincess: Still debatable whether I'll be resurfacing anytime soon,
Haru.

MPrincess: It's always good to be back. Although, you could have
waited another ten minutes for me to get to my room.

Tatsuki looked at her charge before turning her attention straight ahead. Haruto smiled as his BISM buzz for another message. QB9 brought it up without prompting.

MPrincess: Now, I'm going to have to listen to a thirty minute
lecture on decorum.

MPrincess: Your heroism, SB3-QB9, is dully noted.

'*Hey! What have I said about sending her messages?*' Haruto questioned harshly.

The Princess is my friend too. QB9 replied harshly.

MPrincess: Haru, please. QB9 doesn't have anyone else to talk too.

Haruto frowned, the Princess was *his* friend first.

MPrincess: Share, Haru.

GhostHacker: Fine. Fine. But I don't have to like it.

How was the trip? Meet anyone interesting? QB9 questioned easily ignoring Haruto's lingering frustration. **Share, Haru.** QB9 mocked.

MPrincess: Interesting? Maybe. But the trip was mostly tedious.

GhostHacker: Ignore QB, you can tell us all about it like normal.

MPrincess: I should be properly free in three days.

MPrincess: Normal time. I'll unlock the window. Uncle was not pleased the last time you let yourself in.

GhostHacker: If they didn't want just anyone to get in, then they should have better security.

MPrincess: *smiley face*

MPrincess: Arguable, we have the best security on KTS Kanopos.

GhostHacker: Arguable, I have the best security on Kanopos.

SB3-QB9: Get a room, you too.

'QB!' Haruto thought in surprise.

What? This way, you know I'm talking to you both. Clearly you can't complain. QB9 replied to him.

MPrincess: Don't argue, Haru. It's a good idea for QB9 to be on record.

MPrincess: You'll need a proper handler, though SB3-QB9.

GhostHacker: So, now we're inviting him into our chats too.

MPrincess: It's not a members only club, Haruto.

Haruto bite back his reply as he jumped along the rooftops following in the Princess' wake.

SB3-QB9: How about Kitsune?

GhostHacker: I don't know, I like FoxFace better.

MPrincess: Why not Foxy999? I believe you're going for the nine-tale fox, correct?

GhostHacker: The what?

Foxy999: Read you're history kid.

GhostHacker: Why are we spending so much time on QB again?

GhostHacker: You just got back. Please tell me you brought me something?

MPrincess: You know I did. A little something for you both, truthfully.

MPrincess: I'm even told it matches your hair.

Foxy999: Us both?

MPrincess: Yes, you will tell me honestly if you like it, QB9?

GhostHacker: Of course, he'll like it. You were thinking of us, so it'll be perfect.

Haruto stopped at the edge of a building as the Princess and her entourage entered the Gento Kanopos compound. A small section of three interlocking buildings that disguised their importance.

MPrincess: You always say that Haru, which is why I'd appreciated it if at least QB9 was honest with me.

GhostHacker: Can't be anymore...

His message was sent abruptly as he felt his SKIM link with another. A shadow loomed over him as he was yanked from his feet. Looking up he came eye to eye to Guardian Inugami. "Ah, long time no see, Inugami." Haruto replied hesitantly.

The Guardian's visible eye wrinkled into a smile. "It's not like you to let your guard slip. Eh, little Haruto."

"Ha." Haruto replied dryly as he resigned himself to being captured for who knows why. "This wouldn't happen to be a teaching moment would it, Inugami?"

"Sorry to say it isn't." Guardian Inugami replied with a smile.

"Should I even ask what I've done this time?" Haruto smiled sweetly. Sometimes if the offense was low enough, he could talk the Guardian into letting off with some easy chores. Of course that depended on the Guardian's mood.

Inugami shrugged in response. “No clue, but the Sakrá get’s what he wants.” Pulling Haruto over his shoulder, Inugami continued. “Come on, you can talk to your girlfriend later.”

Haruto blushed, “The Moon Princess is my best friend!” His BISM took that moment to buzz. Inugami’s eye crinkled in question. “She’s been gone for like forever!” Haruto defended. “We’re catching up.”

“Well, catch up with your *friend* later.” Inugami replied as he readjusted the redhead. “The Sakrá’s a waiting.”

Haruto sighed as he relaxed into Inugami’s grip. There was no way he was getting out of this.

But I bet we can con the old man into some fancy food. QB9 commented. **I call this a win.**

— 13 —

Inugami didn't believe in doors. With Guardian Kamaitachi, Haruto could be sure that they'd use one. Well nine times out of ten. But that might as well be all the time compared to Guardian Inugami. So, yeah. Inugami didn't believe in doors.

Haruto landed on all fours as the Guardian unceremoniously dropped him. Dry heaving as his senses came back to him. Shutting his eyes tightly as the room continued to spin. He swore underneath his breath. Sooner than normal, his world returned to normal.

What in all the dimensions was that? QB9 demanded.

'Welcome to Guardian transport, QB.' Haruto replied as Inugami picked up him gently.

"Easy now, Haruto. When was the last time you ate something?" Inugami asked gently as he helped him up.

They didn't do that last time. QB9 complained.

Haruto shrugged at them both as he whipped his mouth. '*Kamaitachi's not big on using it. I think there's a large energy consumption or something.*' Haruto continued in his mind. '*It's a Guardian AIM thing. I'm still not*

sure exactly how it works.'

"Here," Inugami replied as he handed Haruto a protein bar. "It wouldn't have effected you so much, if you took better care of your body, little Haruto."

Haruto stomach rebelled at the idea of food, but he knew from experience this always helped. "You could have used the door." Haruto eyed the Guardian with a frown.

Inugami chuckled as he led them out of the receiving room.

We were in one place one second and another place a second later.

What type of dark magic is this? QB9 demanded harshly.

'It's not magic, QB. Honest.' Haruto replied as he followed the Guardian through the winding halls of Command Center. *'It actually took us about thirty seconds or so. It just feels instantaneous.'*

QB9 was silent for a long breath before he replied, **So light speed?** The disbelief was evident in his voice.

'Not quiet that fast, QB9. But yeah, we just moved really, really fast.' Haruto replied disposing the recycled wrapper into his SKIM. He stretched as he placed his hands behind his head. *'That much I've figured out. I just can't figure out how we got on this side of the building without using a door.'* He continued in his head looking around at the hustle and bustle of officers and enlisted alike. *'There must be a door. I just haven't found it yet.'*

What about the Princess? Surely she would know. QB9 questioned slightly less hostile.

'Oh, she might know, but that would be cheating.' Haruto replied as they passed into a familiar waiting room.

"Alright Haruto, you know the drill." Inugami said as he turned to the red head.

The old man's secretary gave him the stink eye, arising above her he responded with a raspberry. "Come on, Inugami. Don't make me stay here." Haruto begged giving his best innocent face.

Inugami's hand rubbed in Haruto's hair affectionately. "Try not to get into too much trouble, eh?"

"But I haven't done anything wrong. Honest! I've just been studying in KOAL." Haruto tried harder. If there was anyone that could be convinced to let him off the hook for whatever real or imaginary slight Haruto had inflicted it was Guardian Inugami.

"Sorry kid. If I let you go, Guardian Kamaitachi's just going to pick you up in an hour. The Sakrá was serious about getting you here today," the Guardian replied. "You'll be fine."

Haruto's face turned into a large pout at the answer.

Oh, just sit down, kid. Your whining is giving me a headache. QB9 complained.

"Fine." Haruto relented as he plopped down on one of the familiar waiting chairs outside of the old man's office. "But you owe me, Inugami."

You can't be seriously. He's a Guardian, he's not going to be...

"Sure kid."

'He's not going to what exactly, QB9?' Haruto thought as he smiled up at the Guardian.

"I'll see you sometime next week, Haruto." Inugami replied with a small wave before disappearing in a blink. The smell and sound of the Guardian's exit still permeating the air.

"Hey," Haruto called out to the secretary. "When's the old man going to be out?"

"When he'd ready, Cadet Hēidòng and not a minute before." She replied sharply eyes still on her Halo screen.

This seems like an excellent time to practice, patience. QB9 replied with a sharp snort. **Or study, your pick.**

The idea of listening to Aeliana drone on for even another second caused Haruto to twist his face into a horrifying expression.

Patience it is. QB9 replied with a dark chuckle.

Haruto snapped out of his horror to frown at the AIM. *'Not cool, QB9. Not cool.'* He replied as he crossed his arms, settling down to wait. And wait. And wait. Tapping his foot noisily for what felt like hours before he gave up. Bursting out of his seat, he went over to bother the old man's secretary.

"Hey lady, when's the old man going to be out? It's been like hours." Haruto could already fill QB9's annoyance at his comment, but the secretary spoke before the AIM had a chance.

"Cadet Hēidòng you've been here for five minutes." Looking up from

her Halo screen, she gave him a suffering expression. “The *Sakrá* will be out after he’s done with his meeting. Go back over there and wait, and stop that insufferable tapping.”

Haruto huffed in frustration before plopping back down into his seat.

I like her.

‘*Of course you do.*’ Haruto replied as he contemplated tapping his fingers along the window seal instead. He considered it for a long second, QB9’s amusement in the background, before deciding it wasn’t worth it. The secretary may not have liked him, but she wasn’t mean to him.

Good decision, kid. QB9 commented. **I was ten seconds away from crapping your SKIM and not cleaning it up for an hour, again.**

Haruto paled at the comment. QB9 had only done that once, but once had been the lesson learned. ‘*You could have asked me to stop first.*’ Haruto replied accusatory.

What? And ruin my entertainment. QB9 gave a dark chuckle in response.

The AIM was evil. Just pure evil. Turning to his BISM, he checked his missed message.

MPrincess: I’ll see you in three days. Try to stay out of too much trouble until than, Haru.

Looking around the *Sakrá*’s office, Haruto gave a long sigh. ‘*Easier said then done.*’ Closing the message, he pulled up the audio file from the vid

he'd been studying earlier. "Rail guns, here we come." He muttered under his breath as the file resumed with Aeliana's monotonous voice.

* * * * *

Zip. Zip. Haruto snapped awake for the umpteenth time as he realized there was no audio playing.

'*Gods above, QB!*' Haruto cursed. '*I had that on auto play for a reason!*'

Stop whining. You'll thank me in a second. QB9 replied.

Half a second later, and the old man's door slide open. '*How did he...*'

"Yes, yes, Masaru. I will of course bring up your points to the council."

The Sakrá replied as he waved some stuffy old Zhùróng out of his office.

"Don't you patronize me, Hwasan. The continued encroachment of those two-bit merchants will not be allowed to continue." The Zhùróng snapped back barely civil. "The laws are on my side on this."

"And the Helians know that, which is why they are only renting space from those Clans that no longer require it." The old man continued with slight exasperation in his voice. "Which we just spent the better part of an hour discussion." Old man points toward the door. "Now, I have another meeting." Old man nodded to Haruto causing Haruto to snap to attention.

The Zhùróng gave Haruto a once over in a face that reminded him of Akihiko's. In fact, it was identical to Akihiko's your-not-worth-the-dust-on-my-boots look. '*That must be his stuck up dad.*' Haruto thought as he didn't even wiggle out of attention. Back ramrod stiff. Arm unmoved.

"Careful, Hwasan." The Zhùróng turned back to the old man. "That

your sentimentalities don't continue to weaken KTS Kanopos." The Zhùróng turned to leave, "If it continues, the Clan Council just might decide a change in leadership is appropriate."

"Careful, Masaru." The old man replied, a glint in his eyes, "Someone might accuse you of mutiny given that only the Great and Honorable Jade Emperor gives power to the Sakrá."

The Zhùróng snorted at the comment, but didn't say anything else as he left.

Well that was intense. QB9 replied.

'Yeah,' Haruto thought worriedly. He didn't want anything bad to happen to the old man. Especially not because of him.

"At ease, Cadet." The Sakrá spoke after a moment of silence passed. Haruto blinked before he realized he was still at attention.

Smiling sheepishly, he relaxed. The old man smiling back at him. "Why little Haruto, that is quite the salute."

Haruto beamed at him as the old man motioned for him to step into his office. "I can do the Keeper one even better."

"Oh, don't I know it." The old man eyes twinkled as he spoke. "Now, I know you must be wondering why I called you here..."

* * * * *

Patting his stomach, Haruto hummed a little jingle as he walked easily down the street. He'd parted ways with the old man a little while back.

I'm not sure why you're so happy. QB9 growled lightly. **He's bribing**

us. Trying to take out the sting of the meeting earlier.

“And it’s working.” Haruto replied aloud as he pat his stomach contently again.

Common trash. QB9 muttered angrily. **What will you tell the Princess!?**

Huh? We just got kicked out of the library. How will we study now!?

QB9 raged on. **OCI!?**

‘Calm down, QB9.’ Haruto replied his expression sobering. ‘It’s not the end of the world. I’ve had worse setbacks, this is nothing.’

Nothing! QB9 roared. **OCI is everything. We need KOAL.**

‘And we still have it.’ Haruto replied easily. ‘We can still go once a week,’ He continued quickly before QB9 could interrupt. ‘And we’ll still have all of the KANP notes. Those aren’t at KOAL, QB.’ Haruto gave the AIM a moment to calm further down.

And you think the Helian girl will still help us, outside of the library?

QB9’s question was surprisingly hesitant. **She doesn’t even give us a backwards glance in class.**

Haruto waved his concerns away as he continued to walk home, ‘Aeliana will need us to help with her Showcase.’ At QB9’s disbelief Haruto continued, ‘Sure, she’s not going to be happy about the arrangement, but will figure something out even if I have to clean my apartment and work from there.’ Turning down a back alley, he continued, ‘No worries, QB. That’s what the Princess will tell you too. No worries.’

Tell her now, then. QB9 demanded.

'Princess? She already said she was too busy right now, QB.' Haruto replied confusingly.

No, you idiot. QB9 cursed. **Helian.**

"Ah," Haruto replied as he stopped in a dead space on instinct. Checking for cameras, he nodded to himself before opening up his BISM and connecting to the GH network.

I don't see why you won't let me send her the message. QB9 whined.

'Because if you do it wrong, I'll be sitting in jail for a month.' Haruto replied as he located Helian's signature. "I hate that place." He continued aloud. "It always smells like butt." He muttered under his breath.

That's a tough little network security. Sure you don't want my help. QB9 commented.

"No, I don't." Haruto answered. *'Shouldn't be surprised the Guild Headquarters has its own network to work around.'* He thought to himself.

"There!"

You're in? QB9 responded. **That didn't take as long as I thought it would.**

'I'll take that as a compliment.' Haruto replied as he hacked into Aeliana's BISM.

Screech!!!

"Star dust!" Haruto cursed, exiting quickly.

What happened? QB9 I thought you had it working out.

"So did I." Haruto muttered as he looked at his access point again.

'Everything looks fine. I'm not sure what went wrong.'

Shrugging it off, Haruto tried again.

Screech!!!

Cutting it off quickly, he sighed in relief at the silence. '*Okay, so not going to work.*' Haruto thought as he leaned against the building in the dead zone.

Interference from the Headquarters network? QB9 supplied.

Haruto shook his head, '*Their security's good, but not Tower One good.*' Haruto paused in thought. '*And Aeliana only has a basic guidance chip. There really should be no problem on their end.*'

Well, then what do we do now. QB9 questioned frustration leaking into his voice.

'Now,' Haruto pushed off the building before starting towards a nearby terminal. "Now, it's time I showed you Red Sector."

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Bending his knees, Haruto absorbed his fall from the terminal tube. Crouching for a second longer, he took a deep breath before pulling himself up right properly.

Why are we here, kid? QB9 questioned as Haruto got a running jump onto the ladder to the rooftop of the nearby building.

'Well, we're going to go into the heart of Red Sector. It shouldn't take that long.' Haruto replied as he jogged along the rooftops, keeping his footsteps light. Mind half on the Keeper patrols that would be out this close between sectors.

QB9 gave a low growl in frustrations. Haruto waved away the feeling.
'The feedback, QB. I've got to fix it. The last thing I need is interference during a prank.' Haruto shivered at the thought.

Haruto let QB9 think on that as he slowed his jog. The last thing he wanted was to meet someone else up here. An ominous shadow to his right, pushed him to the left. Avoiding confrontation was the best way to win it.

The Ghost Hacker network. QB9 replied. **You mentioned it was here, in Lower Level.**

‘Yup!’ Haruto replied as he paused at the edge of the rooftop. Looking down at the trash filled streets, pockets of street gambling and dirty figures that would have looked more at home in the Blue Sector filtered in and out of buildings.

Despite knowing that the majority of dock workers and temps found residency here, Haruto was always surprised by the number of them wearing coveralls. Another reason why he didn’t care to walk on the streets without a disguise. He stood out like a sore thumb.

I also distinctly remembering you mentioning some super crazy woman that lived nearby. QB9 added with some skepticism. **How exactly are we supposed to get past her?**

‘We aren’t.’ Haruto replied as leaned over the other wall. Finding fewer souls about, he scaled down.

Haruto... QB9 growled his name not at all happy to be ignored.

‘Give me a second.’ Haruto jogged quickly across the street before scaling back up to the rooftops. ‘There no catwalk to link the sections, and this place is a pain to be caught on the ground.’

A low chorus of voices caused Haruto to duck behind the buildings emergency exit. Sliding slowly and quietly around, he dashed off to the next rooftop. ‘Anyway, what were we talking about?’

Crazy lady. QB9 replied.

‘Oh, yeah. We don’t get past her. We just have to hope she’s not around.’ Feeling QB9’s anger Haruto was quick to add more, ‘Look, she can go off

ship for like months. So, it's not that bad.'

So, some how we get to the GH network. Then what? Blow on it.
QB9.

Haruto sneak passed another group too busy gambling and smoking to look his way before he answered. '*Don't be difficult QB. We debug it.*' Jumping to the next rooftop, he rolled and crawled passed a group of mean looking mercenaries.

They could be anything. QB9 demanded.
'*Not with those badges.*' Haruto replied as he stayed low to the ground. '*That's the sign for the Guild muscle.*' Haruto continued. When they were passed, he turned to get a second look at one of the bigger guys. '*And definitely not with those blasters hiding in their coveralls.*'

QB9 snorted, but didn't disagree. It was times like these that Haruto was reminded that his AIM still had a lot to learn. It was only as the noise of Red Sector started to decrease that Haruto chanced a look into the streets. Fewer people roamed here. '*Almost there, QB.*' Haruto replied as he made his way across another building. '*And there it is,*' Haruto pointed to a four story building about a block from their position. '*Now, we've got to wait a minute or two to see if the crazy lady is here.*'

How will we know from here, kid? We can't see anyone on the streets from this distance. QB9 complained.

'*Oh, we'll know.*' Haruto added as he sat on the edge of the rooftop to wait. '*Besides, you don't want to be any closer, just in case she's here. She*

doesn't take well to well, anyone really. Best to just stay out of her way.'

There were silent for several minutes before QB9 spoke, **This is ridiculous.** He growled in frustration. **How can you possible maintain the network when you have to go through all of this trouble just to get there?**

'Oh, I don't have to go in person to do low network maintenance and updates, QB. That would just be silly. Anyone would follow me, and it would increase the likelihood the crazy lady found out about it.' Haruto replied as his eyes stayed on the dirty streets of Red Sector. *'No, I do the small stuff at my apartment. I only have to do hardware debug like this in person.'*

You can't possible know it will be hardware. QB9.

'No, but I built the network to fix small software errors automatically. Just a little machine learning that auto checks its systems hourly.' Haruto replied easily. *'I've actually only needed to go back to it once and that was a couple of years ago now. Had to fix a location finder bug.'*

Nodding to himself, he jumped down into the empty side street before making his way towards the abandoned building housing the GH mainframe. The streets were nearly deserted at his building. Haruto gave a hesitant look at the crazy lady's building next to it.

What's here, besides residential area? QB9 asked.

Haruto moved around the boarded up front door to the side alley to find his hidden entrance. *'Ah, well. Lots of bars, gambling dens legal and*

illegal alike. A couple of bar and grills, and of course the brothel houses of Kanopos.'

Finding the entrance, Haruto hooked his BISM into the keypad beginning his de-encryption. He sighed as he watched the program work. '*I really should add a master key for this thing.*' He thought to himself.

Why do they call this Red Sector? QB9 questioned. Is it some play off of those old Red Light Districts?

"What?" Haruto accidentally questioned aloud in his confusion. '*Red light what now?*'

Access granted. His BISM screen flashed followed by the click of the light.

QB9 sighed heavily, **How is it I know your history better than you do?**

'Because you stole a metric ton of KANP documents?' Haruto replied sarcastically as he slide the heavy metal door down enough for him to squeeze through.

Red Sector, kid. Why the name? I get Black Sector with the black light and Blue Sector with the blue light. But no red light anywhere here.

As if to contradict QB9, at that moment the soft white light turned to red. QB9 flushed in anger. Haruto slide into the building pulling it closed behind him as he continued in the almost complete darkness of the abandon building. '*Red Sector's on a different light savor time table than*

Black, Blue and even Green Sectors. But in general the Sectors of Lower Level are named after the light used.'

Well it's obvious now. QB9 replied sharply. **What's the time tables?**

Haruto picked his way carefully as he headed further down into the building. A tunnel he'd built himself into connect to Kanopos' main energy lines. '*Black's on 20/4, black/white cycle. Five hours of black followed by one hour of white, which is normally timed with the compactors.*' Haruto found a hard steel door and opened the access panel. '*Blue's on 2/1, blue/white cycle. Two hours blue followed by one hour of white.*' Putting his hand on the panel, a eye hole opened to scan his retina.

Access granted. Welcome Hēidòng Haruto.

Where in the worlds did you get the tech for this security? QB9 questioned as they stepped into a cooled room. Inside wall to wall of beaten up looking servers.

Haruto smiled as he walked to the work bench. '*You won't believe what people throughout.*' Haruto replied. "This took the better part of four years to construct. Although, some pieces I've had for even longer."

To prove his point, Haruto touched an old KANP tablet he used as his access screen. Some day, he'd get a Halo screen for it, but that was a long time away. "Anyway, Red Sector's just been downgraded to a 14/10, red/white cycle. All in one block as close as they can get to match Solas." Haruto continued aloud as he logged into the Ghost Hacker mainframe. "When I was ten, it matched Solas' 16/8, white/dark cycle. But I guess

Kanopos keeps out growing beyond it's power usage." Haruto continued in a mutter.

This is impressive. QB9 replied. **But what happens when the power goes out, or this energy savor cycle turns on.**

"Nothing." Haruto replied as he began to run a full diagnostics on the network. "I've got the mainframe powered using some old main energy line. Took forever to dig at, and even longer to hack into." Haruto's eyes followed the output as he continued under his breath. "I didn't even know people still used analog in their system setups." Haruto nodded to another sealed off section. "And backing up that line is a backup generator that has about 72 hours of diesel. And backing up *that* backup generator is a power wall I built that's hooked up to the Kanopos backup solar cells. That will last two weeks at full server capacity."

The princess had talked him down from connecting to another dozen of the cells given how hard it had been to acquire Walking equipment. '*That and the danger of unauthorized spacing walking.*'

A little paranoid aren't we? QB9 responded.

Haruto shook his head, "I don't have any of this tech on backup drives." Haruto nodded around. "If I loss this, I have to start from scratch for everything." '*And that's not happening.*'

The makeshift monitor blinked red, Haruto's eyes immediately went to the highlighted text. A frown tugging at his lips.

What is it, kid? QB9 questioned, **I don't see anything odd, here.**

Haruto shook his head as he ran a more specific diagnostic, more of a search algorithm than anything else. “I’ve already accounted for the Guild network frequencies, along with Kanopos main series, DOMAINE, KANP, Keepers, even the short bursts from the Guardian comms. Can’t decrypt most of them, but I know their signals and so does GH.”

The second program finished with more of the same results, **So this unaccounted frequency is part of a new network?** QB9 half questioned half answered. **Is that so rare?**

“Illegal, more like.” Haruto commented as he turned to his emergency toolbox next to his make shift console. “But I’ve got extra signal filters for when any of the others fail.” He continued as he dug out the parts in question. A couple of resistors adjusted and band pass filters identical to the six frequency filters already in the GH mainframe. Adjusting the filter to the new frequency, he turned to the mainframe.

Opening up the mainframe, he bypassed the power to the filters section before plugging in the new addition. “There that should fix the problem.” He spoke aloud as re-introduced the filters section to power. Typing away at his console, Haruto re-ran his full diagnostics. Sitting back he watched it work.

And you’re not at all concerned about an illegal frequency? QB9’s voice grated. A peeved expression lacing Haruto’s own.

Shrugging Haruto replied, “They pop up from time to time.” He let that sit for a moment longer, ‘*Although normally only in the Blue Sector,*’

he added mentally.

QB9 growled in frustration, **So this one reaching all of Lower Level, Solas and probably all of the other Sectors doesn't scream massive plot to destroy the world.**

The AIM's sarcasm was palatable. Haruto rolled his eyes at the dramatics. "Calm down, QB," He replied, but the AIM's mood still raged on. With a sigh, Haruto leaned back into his console. Pulling a second window up and began the work of pin-pointing the signal origins.

Haruto worked in silence for several long minutes. "Sneaky little thing." Haruto muttered as he studied the new frequency. Like this it had a good chance of going undetectable at least by the Keepers' normal cyber security measures.

See! QB9 cried out in outrage. **Nefarious intentions that must be challenged.**

"I said might." Haruto replied sharply. "There's a reason why, I didn't choose to use this method when I was building the GH network." He continued. While a naturally occurring signal, the frequency was just a tad too regular and frequent to be fully normal. Voicing this he continued, "Eventually the Keepers will spot the regularity to it. It might take a week, month or even a year or so, but they'll eventually spot it. Which is why I hop around on pre-existing networks. It's pretty hard to trace something that doesn't stand still."

Even if you hop, you'll have a pattern. Surly that will be traceable.

QB9 replied in disbelief.

Haruto shook his head, “Only if it was a predictable pattern, QB.” Exiting out of the window, he focused back on his AIM. “Look, there’s a reason I’ve sent so much of my time on randomization. My randomized network algorithm is by far my biggest achievement.”

QB9 still seemed unconvinced. “There’s only one natural frequency for them to emulate. Even if they wanted to, they couldn’t change to another frequency. Eventually, they get caught. While the Keepers will be chasing my signal, if they even know to look for centuries.”

A year is a lot of time to enact damage, boy. QB9 countered. His voice laced with unease.

“Alright, alright. I promise I’ll talk with the Princess about it later. Is that enough?”

Haruto could feel QB9’s smug agreement, **Yes. I trust she’ll take this seriously.**

Turning back to his diagnostic program, Haruto changed to topic, “Now, I believe we have other issues to deal with.”

Fingers tapping away on his BISM, Haruto was pleased at the ease of which he could now access Aeliana’s BISM. ‘*Better to just get to the point.*’ He thought as he sent his message.

Hey! Sorry looks like I got kicked out of KOAL.

Don’t word it like that! QB9 chastened in a low growl. **She’ll think we can’t go at all.**

Haruto rolled his eyes, but sent a second message to clarify. **Well, not everyday. Just like I can't go more than once a week.** Before QB9 could speak again, Haruto was already sending another message. **Hope you got another place we can go too. :)**

Were the smiley faces necessary? QB9 commented dryly.

'Of course they were, QB. It's called aesthetic. You could learn to use it.' Haruto replied. Haruto watched the diagnostic as they waited for a reply.

Buzz. Buzz.

88I'll ThiNK oF## soMEthINg.&%7

At the same time, the diagnostic finished. "There, QB9. No problem at all."

I still don't like this. QB9 complained discontentedly.

"You don't like much." Haruto commented dryly as he logged off his console. QB9 growled in response, but said nothing else. Soon enough Haruto was back outside. *'Look QB, honestly the phantom network will probably be gone in a week or two.'* Haruto tried to soothe the AIM as he stepped into the red light of Red Sector.

Heaving the metal grate over his basement access point, he continued '*And if it doesn't, we'll...*' Haruto paused in thought as a familiar figure caught his attention. *'Is that Lieutenant Sang-eo?'*

What? QB9 questioned as Haruto watched the figure enter the building next to his. **The man going into the crazy lady's building?**

‘Yeah that one.’ The AIM’s disbelief was just as clear as Haruto’s own. Tentatively, he stepped out into the street as he watched the place for more signs of movement. ‘There’s just no way, right?’ The thought caught him staring out in the open.

Move kid. QB9 replied softly. **We’ll look into it later.**

Haruto nodded in agreement, ‘Sure.’ Turning to go, he glanced behind him one more time. He had to be wrong.

— 15 —

Arriving at RL2 warehouse, Aeliana led Haruto to the side door. Hooking her BISM into it, the door slid open seconds later. '*I'll have to remember to add Haruto onto the access list.*' She thought as she made her way up the stairs in the dark. Her hand trailing the wall as she traced her steps into the side office.

While she'd never been to this particular warehouse, all of the RLs had the same layouts. Bring back memories of following her father around on his warehouse rounds. Everything was so big back than. She'd thought, she would be the next Guild leader. Be just like her father.

'At least on paper.' She added in her head as she found the lights and flicked them on. Haruto hovered at the door entrance his steps unsure for once. His eyes took in the empty little room.

"Ah?" He began confusion in his voice. "This is ah, great place." He continued.

She sighed as she rolled her eyes. "Turn around."

He did so, and his eyes lit up in excitement. While the boy was generally annoying, his face was unusually expressive. Even when he was simply

playing a role, he seemed to buzz with pent up energy. When he was mad about something, it showed. And so, his pure excitement wasn't hidden under a well maintained emotionless mask. It was these times why she wondered why they needed to hid their feelings. Masking them only half as well as the Gento Clan.

Dismissing the thought for a later time. She felt a small smile edge at her lips as she joined the loud redhead at the doorway. The warehouse laid out before them. "Welcome to warehouse RL2. Currently not in circulation." She couldn't help the smug sound of her voice. RLs were the largest warehouses the Guild owned in Kanopos. They would not lack for room here.

Haruto turned to her with a hint of worry, "And you're sure your folks can spare the place?" He asked. "I mean, look at it?" His arms waved to take in the empty space below them. His face a mask of disbelief. She looked down on it again from his eyes. All that empty space on a ship were space was one of the most valuable commodities right behind oxygen and water. From his perspective, it would be incomprehensible how they could pay for this space and not use it.

'But we are using it.' Aeliana thought. Knowing of the histories of the Helian's use of empty warehouses. Given what she was beginning to suspect about her parents and the Guild, she could not ignore the difference between this warehouse on paper and in real life. But Haruto didn't need to know about that side of the Guild. So she choose a different response.

The official response.

She shrugged away his question she answered without looking him in the eyes, “It’s an emergency warehouse. We have them all over the Kanopos, just in case something goes wrong. The Guild has a reputation to uphold, so warehouses like these are maintained, empty.” Finally she turned to look him in the eyes. “And if all goes well, then it should never get used.” She continued. “And if it doesn’t, there are two more emergency RL warehouses in the Lower Level ready to use as backup. So we should be fine.” She added as she made her way out of the small office.

Three backup RL warehouses were all that her father had managed to obtain here on Kanopos. It wasn’t an ideal situation given the number of warehouses in active circulation, but the Clans had put their foot down on her father buying more for worse case scenarios. The KTS was, after all, limited in space. Even so, Aeliana knew that outside of a catastrophe, the Guild merchandise would be alright. *‘And mother has plans to off load what can’t be stored.’* The Guild would take a hit, selling in such a hurry, but not a big one.

Haruto’s footsteps were surprisingly light as she scrambled down to the main room. Jumping down in his haste as she continued leisurely down the stairs. Of course, if something like that happened. Aeliana was sure that her mother wouldn’t bother storing much at all here given the KTS class as a war ship. No, even if something that devastating happened on Kanopos, the Guild would not be using all three RL backup warehouses.

Maybe not even two of them. So three was probably overkill, but it was also their lucky number and constantly used as a measure for the number of backups. Aeliana herself kept three backup copies of her notes in three separate locations. *'Better to be safe than sorry.'* She thought, her father's words coming to her automatically. And the Helian's were never sorry about anything.

As Aeliana stepped off the stairs, she turned away from the soft harried footsteps of her newest companion. With the light, she easily located the access panel. Plugging her BISM, her biometrics opened all access to the compartments not listed on any blueprint anywhere. She'd secure it on her way out. Tapping on her BISM, she made a note to get Tommy to update the system here for her use, and take it off the Guild network. The last thing they needed was for someone in the Guild to use RL2 to store something off the books. *'Better to just take it completely off the list, than risk Haruto getting involved the Guild business.'* The kid was already a target by the Keepers. The Guild would do best if they stayed clear of him altogether.

“What you doing!?”

Aeliana jumped nearly out of her SKIM at the loud voice to her left. Placing her hand over her racing heart she counted backwards from twenty. A technique she'd needed to master after working with the redhead. “Haruto.” She began opening her eyes to see him fiddling with the access panel. “Dang it Haruto, stop that.” She swatted at his hands. “You don't have the access

clearance yet.”

Haruto gave her a look that said he was confident that wouldn’t matter at the end. She hesitated. Not sure how regular security clearance was given to other Guild members. Not wanting to find out, she took Haruto by the elbow and marched him away from temptation.

She didn’t let him go until they were in the middle of the main room. Spinning around she let Haruto take it all in, “What you can see now is everything on every blueprint of the warehouse.” She started. “It has the latest air filtration system that recycles oxygen 70% more efficient than the mega filtration system used by KTS Kanopos.” She continued. “Although that’s not really hard.” She muttered under her breath. Aeliana grabbed Haruto before he go off and pull the whole thing apart. “And no you can’t take a look at it.” She added harshly seeing the red deflate.

Walking over to the nearest wall, she continued. “Every RL backup warehouse is also equipped with a separate generator and climate control. All Guild patented tech.” She didn’t hid the smugness from her voice as Haruto looked around in awe. Now in her element, she couldn’t help but continue bragging about the Guild tier one warehouses, which but even the best the Gento clan had to shame. “Built on shock absorbers. Nothing that happens to the ship will effect this room.”

Finally arrive at the wall she traced the panels looking for the right section. She knew it only by location, and her mind had was fiercely calculating the polar coordinates to the hidden panel as she spoke. “The walls

are noted to have composite insulation, which is the cheapest, most reliable tech currently on the market.” ‘*There.*’ She thought as she pushed hard on the wall.

Haruto took a sharp intake of breath as the panel moved to reveal an empty space. “But Guild tech has designed a slightly more expensive version that’s takes up a forth of the space leaving room for these hidden compartments.”

Haruto poked his head into the space as his hands moved over the hidden compartment. Aeliana stood back and watched. His face moving as if he were currently having an in-depth conversation. The guy was just short tempered enough to be arguing with himself. His mind moved faster than she’d ever expected. It was just a pity he couldn’t focus it. ‘*Not that he’d every be as quick witted as me, but he could really do some damage if he could just focus for five minutes.*’ He thought as he seemed to have won some kind of argument turning back to face her.

“We’ll use thing to hid our grayish things when we’re done.”

Haruto nodded in agreement, “Like you blaster.” He pointed to her waist. Hidden as it was she was a little surprised he knew it was there.

“Actually, I had something else in mind.” She replied. Ignoring the fact that the blaster would be a little more blackish than gray with regards to legality.

“Yeah?” He questioned clearly confused.

She sighed. “The books about the relics.”

Haruto still looked confused, “Why would you need to hid those?”

She closed her eyes and counted backwards from twenty. “You do know it’s illegal to talk about let aloud read about other Gods.” She continued when she’d calmed down. “Which is why I don’t talk about it at the library.”

Comprehension seemed to dawn on him. “Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*.” She mocked him. Shaking her head. “Haruto it’s basic knowledge that the other Gods are heretical topics. If we’re caught with those books, well...” She trailed off. He father could possibly get her out of that kind of mess, but she’d never be able to return to the Jade Empire at least not as Helian Aeliana. As for Haruto, she had no idea what would happen to him.

“What happens if a Keeper just happens upon the wall?” Haruto asked a slight frown to his face. “There doesn’t appear to be a lot of secure to this.”

Aeliana shook her head. “That’s what I was doing earlier. Opening up all of the hidden panels. Normally, it’s closed, or only one panel is open at a time. But I figured it was best to show you where they all were.” Haruto looked to ask another question but she stopped him. “And no one from the Guild is accidentally going to come in here. I’m taking this warehouse of the network.”

“And your positive none of these secret compartments are on any blueprint, even unofficial ones.” Haruto continued to question his eyes surprisingly serious.

She shook her head in answer. “We keep only one set of blueprints and that are the official ones.” Turning to the panel she closed it. “Either you know where they are or you don’t. We keep no record of their location. Someone has to show you where they are, which is what I’m doing now.” Aeliana moved along the wall as she continued her mental location. Technically what she was saying was true. But there was a formula to their position, so while she’d only been shown the formula and warehouse RL3, she could calculate where the others were based on the position of the corner office.

“Here’s another.” She said as she stopped.

Haruto waved away her silent request to continue showing him the locations of the hidden panels. “I’ll figure them all out later.” He replied as he looked away, clearly deep in thought.

“You’ll need high level security access to open them, so I’ll have Tommy add you to the system.” She continued.

“Huh? What?” Haruto asked coming back to the world around him.
“Security access?”

“Yeah.” She replied. “Otherwise, you won’t be able to use them.” She shook her head. Sometimes he was a little slow.

“Oh, no. Don’t do that.” He replied. She gave him a look. “Look, if you give me security access to them, the the Keepers might be able to use my level of access to find them.”

“The Keepers? Really?” She responded with a roll of her eyes. ‘*They’d*

have to be daft to try and search this place.' She thought, but aloud she simply said, "I don't think we'll have to worry about them here."

"Just in case. Better safe than sorry. And I'm sure I'll find my own way into the system." He replied as he looked in the direction of the box.

Just the thought of him hacking into the Guild network was a scary prospect, especially if her mother ever found out. "Haruto. I swear if you make a mess of the Guild's system, you'll live to regret it." She swear only to have Haruto wave her off. "I'm serious. If my parents find out you hacked the *security* system, then we're both in trouble." Haruto finally looked over at her. "And if I get in trouble for this, *you* will be the one to regret it."

"Alright, alright, alright." Haruto replied giving her a surprisingly good Keepers' salute. "It'll be like I was never there." He continued. "I'd hate to get on the wrong side of the Guild." Haruto paused. "That's not supposed to be good for one's health." He continued in a low mutter.

"Anyway." Aeliana continued. "It shouldn't take long for us to get settled here. Tommy can have everything we need in within a day or two once he knows what he's ordering." She turned as she looked at the open space. '*I should put in a gun range, too. Better than shooting in the house.'* She thought. She'd have to figure out a way to get it hidden, but she was sure there would be a way.

Door opened suddenly causing both her and Haruto to spin in that direction. Blond hair popped out with hands raised. "Hey now little Stargazer, don't shoot." Erik replied as he made his way inside the warehouse. "Tommy

said you where here.”

Aeliana relaxed as she made her way over to the man who was like a brother to her. “Erik, your back.” She smiled as she wrapped him in a hug.

“Alright, alright.” He replied pushing her off of him. “Enough of that, your going to make me all tear eye and stuff.” Turning to Haruto he nodded in his direction. “So who’s the little man? Always figured you had a height requirement.”

“Hey!” Haruto replied glaring at Erik. Aeliana rolled her eyes at them.

“Erik, meet Hēidòng Haruto. Number one prankster in Kanopos and my current study partner.” She replied. “Haruto, meet, Jørgensen Erik. Pretty much my older brother, although not by blood.”

“The body’s mostly water anyway. Bonds of loyalty are much stronger than that.” Erik replied with a smile. “Nice to met you shorty.”

Haruto shuffled his feet around but didn’t respond with more than a grumble.

Pulling Erik aside and away from the grumbling redhead, she spoke. “Sorry about him, while he wasn’t raised in a barn he might as well have been.” She spoke.

“Nah, it’s alright. I know guys like him. You could even say I was one, once upon a time.” Erik replied with a mischievous smile. “Anyway, wanted to be the first to tell you the old man’s going to be home for dinner.”

Aeliana clapped her hands together in her excitement, “Really? Dad’s back?” Erik nodded his smile even larger.

“Stuck with paperwork and the like, but he’ll be properly free come dinner time.” Erik’s smile turned a hint smug clearly with holding information.

“Did he?” She asked.

“Yup! Two relics from Water Country.” Erik roughly messed up her hair. “And I’ve even got a couple of stuffy old tomes to go with them. Tommy’s making digital backups as we speak.”

Aeliana didn’t even care that Erik had ruined her hair. This was the best news yet. “When will can you move them here?”

“Got to get the proper transfer papers, but then I’ll have them moved from the docks. Shouldn’t be too long.”

Aeliana smiled until she heard a crack noise of panels shifting. Turning sharply she’d completely forgotten about Haruto, who had managed to find another hidden panel. “Ahhh, don’t mind me.”

She rolled her eyes as he quickly closed the panel. Best to get him out of the way for a little while. “Why don’t you go make a list of the things you want in the warehouse?” She asked. Her eyes adding, the get out of here part. For once, Haruto seemed to get the message.

“Sure, be back in a jiffy.” He replied as hurried out of the warehouse.

“He’s not so bad.” Erik replied.

“No, I suppose not.” She replied as Erik gave her a sideways hug.

“Didn’t say he was a replacement. Just that sometimes it helps to be around people, is all.” He continued.

Aeliana didn’t respond. Instead her eyes looked at a hidden panel she’d

used once years ago. It seemed silly now, how much she'd wanted, no needed, to know about the Nordic Gods. On the surface a way to be closer to her adoptive brother, but in reality she'd wanted to know about Ilia, whose blonde hair was even brighter than Erik's. It had been a waste of time, of course, as she knew now that the Amur clan had no ties to the Nordic Kingdom. But had lead to her and Ilia bonding over it after she confessed about the illegal activity.

Erik squeezed her again pulling her out of the memory. "Hey nice blaster, by the way."

"Not you too." She replied as she pushed him off her. Pulling the gun out of its hiding place she held it out to Erik's waiting hand. "How did you even know I was wearing it?"

"Its the way you hold yourself." Erik said as he examined the blaster holding it out to fire. He locked it back up before handing it back. "Good work on that one. My first one wasn't nearly as balanced."

She couldn't hold back the smug smile she had at the compliment. Even so, she didn't respond. Patting her shoulder lightly he surveyed her warehouse. "I'll have something installed. You'll want to practice in an actual range."

She nodded. As she followed him around, imagining the place in full swing.

"And don't worry. This," he nodded to the blaster she'd put back into her makeshift holster. "Will remain between the two of us. No need to tell

the old folks about everything."

She nodded in agreement. The less her parents knew, the better.

— 16 —

This chapter is pretty much filler if I can't think of something to place here.

What to do? What to do?

Something to do with the Heidong Effect?

Maybe meet Anko and build relationship between him and Iruka?

I'm just not sure how I can fit it into the timeline. Other than random chance in Red sector.

Haruto's eyes fell onto the room at large. There were more people here than he'd thought would bother on an off day.

QB9 - give me access to KOAL and I'll have all their information in a heart beat

'I'm not hacking into the system. I don't know any of their weak points and we just spent hours getting access to the place.'

* In KOAL, Haruto observes people...

Haruto rolled his eyes. *'Look, QB. There are two ways a master hacker like myself gets information.'* He replied. *'The first of course is to hack into the system, but that needs days of prep to do successfully.'* Sitting down at

a empty table, Haruto pulled out his KANP tablet and logged onto the KOAL network. ‘*Strategy number two, while it sounds easy is just as hard. Listen.*’

Listen!? QB9 raged back, but Haruto was only half listening to him. **I listen just fine.**

Haruto waited a beat longer as he continued to listen to the students around him.

You are the one with the listening problem! QB9 continued, getting angrier by the second.

‘*Did you know that those six students are sixth years KANP cadets?*’ Haruto replied.

What? QB9 spoke, his rage settling.

‘*And those three are from the same Gento orphanage program.*’ Haruto nodded his head in the direction of three student, two boys and a girl huddled together over one Haloscreen.

QB9 paused briefly, **How can you possible know that?** He questioned darkly.

‘*Body language, coveralls, size and height.*’ Haruto could tell he had QB’s attention so he continued. ‘*See that group over there, four girls all with the same badge on their coveralls?*’ Knowing he had QB9 attention he continued. ‘*They’re orphans, but live together in one of the apartments at the end of Solas. Closer to the Sakhalin sector than the Gento sector.*’

How could you possible know that without hacking their BISM, or

the KOAL register? QB9 questioned.

'Easy. That badge is for orphanage 5A in the Sakhalin sector, which can only hold a small number of kids. All orphanages prioritize the younger children, which means those girls live in group.' Haruto replied. *'And before you ask. I know they live together because of their familiarity with each other. They laugh ease, brush each other SKIMs without thinking about it. That's group life.'*

There was a long pause. **Why don't you live in a group home?** QB9 questioned.

'I was born in Kanopos, or so the old man tells me, but my mom, she was a Heidong. Our clan, just like that Haibeu and the Gento took genetic modification to for space travel to the extreme.' Haruto pulled up a picture of a smiling blue-eyed red haired woman. Her ears pointed, eyes slanted, and nose just a little sharp, animalistic markings on her face. *'I look different, scare to some. And without a Clan to share in my oddity, well...'*

She was a very beautiful woman.

Haruto's hand traced her face, *'Yeah, she was.'*

Haruto twirled a thumb drive between his fingers as he walked down the streets of Blue Sector on his way to his newest hangout, the warehouse. Given the time of day, he was more than sure she'd be there. '*Think she won't mind the additional requests?*' Haruto thought.

If you'd just let my write the food list from the begin, we would have already had everything by now. QB9's rough growl was cut off by Haruto's own thoughts.

'Yeah? And let you forget the MINOS.' Haruto replied just has hotly shaking his head hard. 'Besides, I wasn't sure that was included.'

And I said, it didn't hurt to be prepared. QB9 replied. **But no one listens to me.**

"Anything." Haruto countered aloud. 'Look, I still don't know if this is really a blank check, you know. And we can't be greedy about this.' Haruto continued in his head as he turned down a sketchy street. His eyes scanned the shadows, moving away from a lump pile.

Given his face, he tried to avoid places that weren't heavily patrolled. But as he'd yet to install roof access to the warehouse, he'd was forced to

travel by street.

Look kid. If you don't ask for it, then we can't get it. QB9 added grumpily. **What's the worse that can happen? She says no.**

'Aeliana decides I'm not worth the effort.' Haruto countered. *'Honestly, I don't see what she gets from this arrangement.'*

QB9 was silent for a moment. **Kid, you did read the requirements to get into OCI. Right?** Haruto hesitated in his response. **Right!?**

'Well, you see...' Haruto began, but was stopped by the a wave of fury washing over him. *'Honestly, QB I was going to read it, but I got distracted.'*

It's a paragraph of text...

"Not the way Aeliana describes it." Haruto muttered.

Haruto could feel QB9's disapproval. **Creativity.**

'Huh?'

Why the Helian girl needs your help. QB9 grumbled out. **Just be glad she's got no other options.** He continued. **Force is the only reason anyone would spend any length of time with your incompetence.**

'Hey!' Haruto thought slightly hurt. *'The Moon Princess likes my just fine.'*

QB9 snorted. **You still haven't even asked her name.**

Haruto blushed in embarrassment. *'I'll do it in my own time.'* He replied.

Yeah, right after you build my body. QB9 replied harshly.

'If, I build you a body. If!' Haruto replied.

I thought that was why your taking that stupid Trade course. QB9 growled. **That's the only reason I agreed to it.**

'Keep your SKIM on. If I build you a body, then it will help.' Haruto moves across the street to avoid a group of lurking individuals. Playing some game, but he didn't want to try his luck. *'I could always drop out, or never show.'* He continued.

You wouldn't. QB9 replied.

'Try me.' Feeling like he had the upper hand once more, his thoughts turned to a different concern. First, he'd need to install roof access to the warehouse, then he could work on creating his own false compartment. He'd only heard stories about the Guild. Impossible to avoid in LL. *'Still better safe than sorry.'* QB9's approval filtered through his senses.

A shift in the air caused Haruto to dodge right. Rolling to he bounced off a building to a nearby trash can. The metal rang in the alleyway as Haruto continued to dodge a heavy fist. No time to think, he continued up the side of the building. *'Three, no four of them.'* Jumping over to the next building he continued.

Left. Right. Duck.

The thoughts, not his own, came to him without full comprehension, but he didn't have time to analyze it. *'Roof?'*

Terminal around the corner. QB9 replied. **Accessing now.**

Dodging to the right of a large fist, Haruto used his momentum to jump onto the scowling man's head. Another jump and he was nearly home free.

Hands on the edge, Haruto pulled himself into the roof. One foot on the rooftop.

Right!

But the warning was too late. Haruto just managed to get his arms up to protect again serious damage. The force of the hit was clearly from a military grade SKIM enhancement. ‘*Star dust!*’ Haruto thought as he rolled with his momentum.

Just get to the edge, kid. QB9 replied as the roll slowed.

Using his momentum, Haruto pushed off into a front flip. **Above.** Turning the flip into a slide was easier said than done, but some how he managed. The fist aiming for his center mass passed centimeters above his hair.

Two meters kid.

Without pause, Haruto jumped out of his slide and rolled to the right. In a dead sprint, he took four steps before sliding again to the edge of the rooftop.

“Ahhh!” The man voice from behind him screamed out as his hand just brushed Haruto’s shoulder. A smile began as he let the ships artificial gravity do the rest.

Yank!

‘*Oh no.*’ Haruto thought as he hang in mid-air over the ledge. ‘*A SKIM linker, but those are government use only.*’

“The old man’s not going to like what I’ve going to tell him about his.”

Haruto began as he was pulled back onto the roof. The original four men huffing a meter back.

“Well it’s a good thing I don’t work for him anymore.” The voice was familiar. Haruto looked up and tried to place him. **A disgruntled Guardian?** QB9 questioned.

‘*No, not the right built.*’ Haruto replied in his head eyes still search.

“You never said he’d be this hard to catch.” One of the other four wheezed out.

Another shook out his fist. “Yeah, the kid made me hit a wall.” The man grimaced in pain before the bruising in his head disappeared. “Those units are coming out of your pay.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The man hold him replied dismissively. Turning back to Haruto he continued. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten me already.”

The face was familiar, could it be? “Sergeant?”

“Bingo!” Turning to his men he continued, “Boys looks like I did make an impression. Wasn’t sure after all that class he missed.”

“Like I give a damn.” One of the men replied. They all seemed to have gained their breath.

“How have you been, Sergeant?” Haruto tried a friendly voice.

That's right. Talk your way out of this. QB9 voice rumbled gently.

“Sergeant?” Haruto’s once teacher questioned, his voice had a hard edge to it. “No one calls me that anymore.” The man ran the fingers of his free hand through his short hair. Eyes closed in some kind of memory, before

snapping open. A burning hatred Haruto had seen before. “Not after I was fired, anyway.”

“Fired?” Haruto questioned, “You were a great Sergeant.” He continued voice as genuine as possible.

The other man, whose name, even now, Haruto could not remember, gave a cold hard bark of a laugh. “Ha! Can you believe the stones of this kid?” He tossed back.

“He’s kinda funny, if you asked me.” One of the lugs answered.

“Yeah, from everything I’ve heard. You sucked at it.” Another continued.

“And let’s not forget the KANP incident. The whole ships still talking about that one.”

Haruto’s old Sergeant turned to him, shaking him roughly, “And I have *you* to thank.” He spat. “You, no name, no good, demon!” He shook with rage. “You ruined my life!”

Technically, he was stupid enough to link to the KANP center hub.

QB9 added.

‘Not helping!’

“Because of the prank?” Haruto questioned.

“BECAUSE OF THE PRANK!” He roared. “Data went missing, and someone had to be blamed.”

“I’m so sorry, Sergeant.” Haruto gave his best innocent eyes. “But I had nothing to do with that prank. The Guardians and the Keepers heavily

reviewed my involvement and had to apologize for their treatment.” Which was all only technically true as the Guardians hadn’t done much outside of deliver him to the Keepers, but the Sergeant, or ex-Sergeant didn’t need to know that.

The ex-Sergeant’s arm drooped and for a moment, Haruto thought he might have talked his way out of a beating.

“The thing is, I don’t care what the Keepers, or *Guardians*, can prove. You did it. I *know* you did.” The ex-Sergeant continued. “For months, I’ve just been trying to stay tethered.” Cold laugh, “but no one will hire me. Well, no one legitimate. No offense guys.”

“None taken.”

“And I’ve dreamed of this moment. What I’d do once, I found you out where you don’t belong.” The ex-Sergeant pulled him closer to his face. “Where no Keepers can keep you *safe*.”

“Really, we don’t have to do this.” Haruto add. His hands up in surrender.

There was a long pause as the ex-Sergeant just stared at him. “It’s now or never, Cho.” A man called out. Haruto didn’t turn to find out.

‘*QB, please tell me you have a way to get me unlinked.*’

I need another ten maybe fifteen minutes, kid.

‘*I don’t even have one.*’

“You see, I honestly had given up on this. We leaving tomorrow, and I almost didn’t get to return the favor.” Before Haruto could reply, Cho

shook him silent. "No, you've talked long enough. Listen for once!" He waited and Haruto shut his mouth.

'Please work faster, QB.' Haruto thought.

Cho hand caressed Haruto's face as he spoke. "I'm going to enjoy this."

"Star dust." Haruto cursed. This was going to hurt.

— 18 —

It was the shooting pain he recognized first. Then the struggle to breath. Groaning, Haruto attempted to open his eyes, but they were slow to listen to him.

Easy, now. Easy. QB9's voice sounded gently in his head.

Slowly he opened his eyes, well really mostly his left eye seeing as his right seemed to be too swollen to see much of anything from. The soft red of the Lower Level junkyard greeted him. Soon enough the sharp edges of metal bins long past their time made their presence known. The warmth from the unnatural heat of the furnaces was a surprisingly welcome relief from the possible alternatives.

'Well, that could have gone better.' He thought as he shut his eyes again. He was beyond tired and just wanted to sleep a little longer.

I expected a little more, I don't know... concern about nearly dying.

QB9's sarcasm echoed in his head bring Haruto's attention to the sharp pain coming from his nose.

Carefully lifting the arm he deemed less injured to his face, he let his fingers feel the damage to his nose. *'Could have been worse.'* Haruto replied

just before he sharply straightened out his broken nose. Taking a quick intake of breath at the pain only caused more of it.

“Can’t you do something about my broken ribs?” Haruto asked aloud in nothing more than a bare whisper.

No. You’ve run out of medicine, and I had other priorities to think about. QB9 replied angrily. For once, Haruto could tell the anger wasn’t direct at him.

Laying back down, Haruto tried not to think about how bad he must have been in to run through all of the medicine in his BISM. Especially seeing as he still felt like crap. And every breath was a nightmare of twisting pain. One of his lungs was probably still clamped, but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t live through.

You can’t go around with empty medicine vials kid. QB9 continued worry clear in his voice. **And seeing as we won’t be back to KANP for four weeks, I don’t see how we get around hospice and the Keepers.**

‘*Don’t worry QB. I’ve got extra supplies for rainy days like this.*’ Haruto thought. ‘*You every wonder why they call them rainy days? I wonder if...*’ A loud grinding sound interrupted his thoughts as the pile of junk his was currently on top of started moving. ‘*Great, they couldn’t have tossed me on a different pile.*’

I might have made them think you were dead. And bodies tend to smell when not disposed of quickly. QB9 answered. There was something under his tone that Haruto couldn’t quite figure out. As he was starting

to get a pounding headache, he decided to leave it for another time. The moving trash pile more of a concern.

Attempting to sit up, the pain in his ribs discouraged any further action, so Haruto returned to his prone position.

Kid, come on. We can't stay here. Not if we don't want to end up as space junk. QB9 spoke softly aware of his pounding headache.

“Give me a moment, okay.” Haruto replied as he breath slowly in and out. The pile of junk slowly moving beneath him. Opening his eyes, he gently turned his head to each side hoping against all odds that he was somewhere close to some old coveralls. ‘*I ought to start wearing them, if for only this reason.*’

Kid... QB9 warned softly as their trash pile continued to shrink. **We don't have time for whatever you're thinking.**

“Going to have to make time, QB.” Haruto as he spotted a piece of coverall fabric within reach. Extending his arm, he could feel QB9’s anxiety. ‘*Don't worry, QB. I've got this.*’

You've still got to get down, kid. Any you haven't even tried to stand up yet. QB9 voiced his worry.

Haruto ignored it for now. Instead, he gently wrapped the warn and dirty coverall around his waist. Tightening it to secure his broken ribs. Taking a deep breath for the first time, he relaxed back into the pile for a moment to rest.

Kid, you're killing me here. QB9 whined in a deep warning.

"Alright, alright, alright. Just give me a second." Haruto complained.

We don't have a second. He growled back.

'No, we've got plenty of time.' Haruto replied as he started the painful process of curling into a ball. His hands around his neck in protection, finally the AIM seemed to understand how he planned to get down.

Rolling in the opposition direction of the junk compressor, Haruto tried to keep his arms and legs in place to avoid further damage to his ribs or a painful break of his neck. Soon enough he was at the bottom of the trash heap. The tumble down drew in his legs deep into the junk, but Haruto had a good grasp of the catwalk that he was sure he could pull himself out.

'But man is this going to hurt.' He thought as he steadied his hands on the ledge.

With a groan he slowly pulled his legs out of the trash, and pushed his tired body onto the catwalk. The metal clanged as he slumped back down onto his back the warmth from the furnaces lulling him to sleep. 'I think I've earned a break.'

Haruto blinked away, unsure how much time had passed, or what woke him.

Hey kid. I know you need your beauty rest, but the dock ships leave at noon.

Haruto hummed in acknowledgment, but didn't move from his place. QB could wait a moment or two. Feeling a restlessness not of his own, he opened his eyes with a sigh. Fiddling in his SKIM, Haruto pulled out his

lucky fox foot. Using the silver ring, he twirled it a little with a small smile.

'Hey QB, do you think she liked the dream catcher?' Haruto asked.

There was a short pause before the deep grumbling voice of his AIM followed. **Sure, why not?**

Letting his hand drop on his chest, he tried not to take too deep of a breath in frustration. "You're a whole lot of help, you know."

Look kid. I don't study human interactions all that much. They're boring. So, give me a break. QB9 replied. **I'm sure since you gave it to her, she liked it. The girl's way smarter than you, so I'm sure she gets the importance without it needing to be explained.**

Haruto was hesitate to see it QB's way. *'Is that supposed to be reassuring?'*

QB9 growled in his mind reminding Haruto of his headache. **Kid, we don't have all day here. And as much as I hate to admit needing you, my plan would benefit from a pair of hands.**

Putting the gift from his friend away, Haruto rolled over to his stomach. Getting his knees under him, he pushed up to a seated position. Taking stock of his injuries for the first time, Haruto went through his limps. A swollen ankle, but he had meds that would decrease inflammation at home. His legs seemed fine, but his right arm might have a hairline fracture. *'Do I have more osteo-regeneration serum?'* He thought.

Not able to remember, he shrugged it off.

I'll give you this. Not just anyone could shrug off those injuries.

From everything I know about human biology, you shouldn't be able to walk. QB9 added. Haruto could feel him holding back. Given how injured he was when he woke up, it was more likely he'd be dead.

'But, they always underestimate me.' He thought. "Always." He muttered to himself. Letting his hands move to his pain coming from his ears, he spoke aloud to QB. "Didn't anyone ever tell you, QB?" slight pause, "I'm a monster."

Straightening out the little bones in his ear, he held back a yell of pain. At least now they'd heal correctly.

You're no more monster than I. QB added after a moment. **Just a little different.**

"Maybe." Haruto replied after a few seconds of rest. Fixing a broken nose? No problem, but his ears. They throbbed worse than before, but if they grow back incorrectly, the KANP medics would have to re-break them. All cadets had to be in fighting shape based on biology. Haruto would sooner have cut them off, if the old man hadn't given his big spiel about family and legacies.

With a heave, he stood up leaning heavily on his uninjured foot. "Alright, now what do you need me for?"

Only for a little payback. The malice behind the words were startling.

"Against Name?"

And his new friends. QB9 added. **I was able to hack into the theta dock, where their ship is located, while you were resting. Surprisingly**

poor security.

“It’s theta dock. Of course their security sucks.” Haruto replied as he began to limp out of the junkyard. “You still haven’t gotten to me, yet.”

I’m getting there. QB replied. **I’ve got the schematics of their ship.** **It won’t take much to cross wire the fusion core to the thrusters.** He added. **And than once they leave port. BANG!**

“What?” Haruto paused sharply. “I’m not *killing* anyone!”

What? Now you’re against murder? QB9 replied. **You’re training to become a pilot.**

“Pilots *protect* people, they don’t kill them.” Haruto countered. “Haven’t you read Mizumi’s Dream?” He muttered under his breath.

Come now, you can’t believe that romanticized piece of fiction is the pilot life? QB9 sarcastic disbelief.

“Look, QB. I don’t care if it’s real or not. *I’m* not killing anyone.” Haruto continued. There was already too much death in the world for him to be adding to it.

Fine. I’ll do it myself. QB9 replied.

At QB’s reply, Haruto could just imagine the mess of a hack. Closing his eyes in frustration, knowing his AIM would do this with or without him. “Alright, I’ll help.” QB9 pleased feeling. “But, I’m not going to kill anyone.”

He could feel his AIM’s displeasure. ‘*Do you still have the documents you acquired from KANP?*’ Haruto continued without waiting for QB9’s

agreement.

Yes. Why do you want to originals? QB9 questioned, not quiet seeing where Haruto was going with it.

'I think it's time to give the Keepers what they want.' He thought to QB9. "Don't you?" He finished aloud.

With that, he continued limping his way home. Sure that his body wouldn't be able to stand a trip in the tubes. Cold dark laughter feeling his head.

* * * * *

A couple of hours later, found Haruto sipping a nice cold drink of a type of fruit punch.

You know it's mostly sugar, kid. It's not actually made of real fruit. QB9 commented.

'Don't care.' He replied. When something tasted this good, why complain about it's fruit content. Now that his face looked less like someone had tried to manually rearrange it, he was going to enjoy the finer things in life. *'Like artificial flavoring.'*

Slurping away, he pulled his docker hat down a little lower on his head. His docker coveralls, hand-stitched, would help him blended in with the rest of the people in theta dock, but that was as long as no one caught sight of his ears.

Another little tug to keep the hat in place, he knew he was just another dock kid taking a break from a long morning of work. Haruto pulled out

his KANP tablet. With the help of his tunneling program run through his BISM, it didn't take long before he'd found the ship he was looking for.

The security of GC Samaritan was laughable compared to the dock security, which was saying something as theta dock had the worst security, both internal and external, of all the docks in KTS Kanopos. Seconds later, Haruto was in the network.

'There's the cameras.' He thought as the feeds started showing up on his screen. The captain of the ship a short balding man with a pudgy stomach was drinking something at the helm as his navigation crew worked on the consoles. Haruto flipped through their screens next. *'Basic diagnostics, huh.'*

They're nearly finished, kid. You need to stall them a little longer. QB replied. Looking at the time, he had to agree. Hacking in, he placed a small bug into the navigation system. Nothing out of the ordinary, but it'd take them an extra ten minutes before they were ready for launch.

"What's taking so long?" The Captain snapped at his crew.

"Nothing we can't handle, sir." One answered.

"We'll be ready to launch in ten minutes." Another said. The Captain nodded as he turned to his own console, probably reviewing their route.

'Not that it will matter.' Haruto thought. They weren't going anywhere if all went according to plan.

It's not too late to just blow them up. QB commented.

'I'm not a killer.' Haruto replied. QB9 didn't reply, but Haruto could

feel his mild irritation all the same. ‘*We do this my way, QB. You agreed.*’

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just get on with it.

Five minutes later and the sounds of sirens could be heard. Looking up, Haruto watched as the flashing yellow lights of a Keeper unit rushed down the docks. ‘*Right on time.*’

There's a first for everything. QB9 commented.

Rolling his eyes, Haruto monitored the video feeds of GC Samaritan. Finding the ex-Sergeant Cho easily enough, he watched the scene unfold.

The Captain rose as the Keepers strolled onto his command deck. “What is the meaning of this?” He demanded.

Ignoring the question the lead Keeper spoke, “Summon your crew at once.” Turning to his partner he continued, “Scan them into the database when they arrive. I don’t want to miss anyone.”

The Captain frowned but did as he was told, “All of my people are registered, and so is my paperwork. You’re making a big mistake here.”

The Keeper didn’t even acknowledge his presence as they waited for the ship crew to emerge. ‘*There, that looks like everyone.*’

The Keepers nodded to each other as the last of the Samaritan crew filed on deck. Tilting his head, the Keeper began to speak, “Captain, this is team two, we have the crew. Ship is ready to be secured.”

“What!?” The Samaritan ship Captain shouted. “I demand to know what’s going on.”

Haruto watched as a Keeper program took control of the ship remotely.

Smiling all the while.

“You are being charged with aiding and abetting the transfer of classified documents.”

“What? I’d never...”

“This is God Chaser Samaritan, ID number 256DW13X?”

“Yes, but...”

“And you recently hired Civilian Cho Joon-Woo,” The Keeper nodded to the man in question. “Last stationed at the Kanopos Academy of Novice Pilots?”

“Yes, but...”

Nodding the Keeper motioned to his partner, “Ready for booking.” The crew flew to their knees, arms twisted behind them as their SKIMs glared bright red.

‘Man, I didn’t know that could do that.’

Their SKIMs are all linked to the ship, kid. Look. QB9 spoke in his low gravel.

Sure enough, Haruto could see that each BISM was duel linked to GC Samaritan.

“You can’t do this!” Cho yelled out. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Save that for the Sakrá.” The Keeper replied, a hard tone to his voice.

“I demand to know the charges!” Cho continued.

“Treason.” The Keeper’s partner answered. The crew gave a collected hush.

"Hey, now." The Captain replied from the flour of his own deck. "I don't know anything about any treason. I hired him because he was cheap. Take him, I'll give you everything I have on him."

"You'll give us what we want regardless." The lead Keeper replied.

"I have rights!" The Captain continued. "As a member of the Guild, all complains and concerns must go through their legal department!"

'Uh oh, didn't know that.' Haruto thought as he immediately began navigating into the ship's Guild's registration.

"Command, can you confirm Guild membership?" The Keeper asked.

'Just a second, just a second.' He thought as he frantically typed. *'There!'* Leaning back he smiled as the Keeper's face darkened.

"Nice try," the Keeper's partner answered as he began the prisoners to the mobile flat.

"Next time you want to use Guild membership, you might want to keep said membership current."

"What? That's impossible. I renewed my membership months ago." The Captain yelled.

"Your registration says otherwise." The lead Keeper replied as they got to Cho.

"Wait, wait." Cho yelled. "I still don't know what I'm accused off." He continued as he tried to pull away.

"Did you really think you'd get away with this?" Keeper asked. "That the Keepers of the Peace wouldn't get to the bottom of the theft of thou-

sands of classified documents?"

"I..." Cho began confusion written on his face. "That was Hēidòng! Everyone knows that."

"No, the prank was Hēidòng." The Keeper countered. "But the recent transfer of said files from this ship to the nearby Kumo satellite gave the plot away."

"You steal classified documents during Hēidòng's prank. With his history everyone blames him for the theft, while you get yourself kicked out of KANP so it seems like you have no other options." His partner continued. "It was almost perfect."

"But I." Cho continued, "this is Hēidòng! Can't you see he's framing me!?"

"Oh will you shut up Cho." The Captain snapped. "Hēidòng's a prankster, not some manipulative mastermind." He continued as he sat down on the mobile transporter, his hands locking to the metal surface.

"Now," the Keeper's partner continued. "Will you come quietly?" He eyes showed he hoped the answer was no.

As if the Gods were looking down on Haruto, Cho knocked the Keeper away. Probably using his illegal SKIM linker to override the Keeper's control before Haruto could even begin to help the ex-Sergeant.

The Keeper's eyes condensed and the diamond shape of the Gento nanites activation took form. The Keeper dropped into the Simply Grace fighting style his Clan was famous for and in a blare of movement, Cho

collapsed. Blood spit from his mouth as his body twitched. An electric current coursed through his SKIM.

“Illegal SKIM linker deactivated.” The Keeper replied.

“You know,” one of the navigation crew began, “he was kind of a dick anyway.”

Haruto held back a laugh as he disconnected from GC Samaritan. His once Sergeant would have a very hard time getting out treason charges.

I still think we should have killed him. QB9 commended, but Haruto could feel his approval.

“Would have been too quick.” Haruto replied. “Now, he’ll never see the new moon.”

— 19 —

Aeliana chapter, invitation to Koutaishi breathing day party...

— 20 —

The heavily clank of the 'students' around him and QB9 quite reminder had Haruto putting weight into his every step. Joining the noise as they walked across the catwalk above the 'heart' of ZPS. Or at least that's what Head Tech Suio was calling it.

"Now, this is where we build all of the gravity independent weaponry." The Head Tech pointed below them pausing as he talked. Haruto took several steps over the to side to get a better look. Hands on the railing he leaned over.

Large machinery was casting what looked to be both plastic and metallic forms. '*It almost looks like fire.*' He thought, but knew better.

"Now you might not be away yet, but our patented chemical flame that you see at work down there is five times hotter than actual fire. And burns without the consumption of oxygen." The Tech paused, amusement in his voice. "Now, don't ask me anymore question about it." He continued as if someone had asked about it to begin with. Given that Haruto was in a group of quiet ones that was nearly impossible. "I'd have to kill you if I told you any more. It's that sot after."

Haruto leaned more over the railing. ‘*Is that sulfur? Could I replicate it?*’ He thought.

Not on your life, kid. QB9 responded bitterly. **Now if you just let me at their systems. I could have the recipe in minutes.**

Haruto snorted as he tuned out the rest of the Head Tech’s speech about the chemical flame. It was mostly just boasting and not worth his attention. ‘*As if I’d let you anywhere near it. One KANP incident is good enough for me.*’ He thought back. He was still looking over his shoulder for that one, well he used to looking over his shoulder for that one. For now, the ex-Sergeant was paying for his crimes.

QB9 mood seem to darken, but Haruto didn’t think it was because he’d been denied a hacking opportunity. Haruto had deny him plenty of them while they trained QB at better techniques. Whatever his problem, Haruto wasn’t sure he needed to know about it.

“Hey, kid,” Haruto felt a pull at the back of his temperature cover all. Fighting his instinct to run, he went with the movement returning to the catwalk proper. “Ah,” The Head Tech looked at him hard searchingly.

“Kim.” Haruto supplied the name.

“Yeah, Kim.” He parried back, but Haruto could already see recognition leaving him. “Try not to fall down there. Wouldn’t want to have to explain to the Sakrá how I lost one of you guys to the flames.” He replied with a small smile.

Haruto nodded slightly in understanding, but chose not to speak. To-

morrow Head Tech Suio would have already forgotten about him, at least that was the plan.

“And has anyone, um.” He looked lost for words, “I mean have you considered changing your hair or something.” He looked over in the direction of the two other Kims in the class.

“Sorry?” Haruto asked innocently.

“Ah, never mind.” He pulled back. “It’s like a freaking uniform or requirement or something.” He murmured under his breath. Cause Haruto to fight back a large grin. Kim Min-jun, was the most common name for his year group and the two years born before and after him. That year also had a surprising amount of orphans. From Aeliana’s notes, he’d learned that was because of some micro-battle.

As if mortal combat can be considered micro. QB9 complained as they continued their end of day tour. Haruto had been preparing all week for *this* tour.

‘I don’t make up the names for these.’ He answered QB9 as he looked further ahead. They were almost at the way station for pryo district of ZPS.
‘Besides, didn’t Aeliana explain it was called that because no other major power was involved?’

It was the one thing he’d picked up from their history lesson that had supposedly happened three years ago. Although he was sure he’d have remembered something so exciting. It wasn’t everyday that Kanopos was attacked by rogue pilot ships.

Kid, they were only rogue because they failed. QB9 commented. Haruto could feel annoyance and hatred at the thought. **Humans.** Was added as an afterthought. **You'll kill anything, and everything in the end.**

'I don't think its that bleak, QB.' Haruto responded as they finally arrived to the way station. QB9 snorted in his head.

That's because you're naive, and too trusting.

Now that was going too far. He didn't think he was that trusting after all.

"Now, my future techs just give me a moment while I log in to the system."

Haruto moved toward a terminal as he waited for the Head Tech to log in. The ZPS, or really the Zhùróng in general had learned several valuable lessons from his pranks. Chief among them was never linking systems together, which meant that if he wanted those beautiful weapons specs, he was going to need to access *this* terminal. *'And we won't be coming back.'*

The Head Tech stepped back as the Halo screen lit up with some of the more basic weapons modules. *'Go time.'* He thought as he plugged in his BISM to the terminal behind him.

"Why don't we start with the basics?" He pointed to the screen as he continued. "The Zhùróng Pyrotechnic Studios is the leading supplier of weaponry to the Kanopos pilots program, which includes all of us little

people.” He smiled around as he cycled through another set of basic blasters, long ranged and short ranged.

Looking at his tablet, ZPS propriety. Haruto appeared to be taking notes, but instead he was directing his hack into the weapons files.

I'd be ten times faster than this. QB9 complained.

‘And you’d also announce to the world that we were in the system.’ He thought as he downloaded a set of long ranged blasters. *‘We’ve talked about this. Once you’re as good as I am at hacking without leaving a footprint, then you can start hacking real targets again.’* Haruto was not having another KANP incident.

“This blaster can penetrate armor at grade ten level, which is just a step below ZenKZ.” The Head Tech pulled up the schematic of another blaster that was nearly as big as Haruto was himself.

‘But can anyone pick it up?’ He thought.

Just take the schematic. Aeliana could use more diversity.

Putting it into the file, Haruto dumped another ten other heavy armor penetrating files. Some of them looked experimental, or well most of them.

All but that one on the screen kid. Won’t matter when we get our hands on them.

“Now, what you’ve all been waiting for.” The Head Tech gave them a big small as he pulled up another schematic from his BISM. “The gravity depended weaponry.”

What looked like a armor penetrating blaster took the screen followed

shortly by a ZenKZ to put it to scale.

'Well, dang that's big.'

"We also supply Kanopos with all manors of ZenKZ and ship weaponry."

He pulled up another. "This little baby will be installed in Kanopos next week as an upgrade."

Get those kid!

Haruto pulled up the file and downloaded the whole lot.

The Head Tech looked around before pulling up another schematic, "But this is my baby." He replied. "A master work of hydraulic power for the first time being placed in a ZenKZ."

Haruto looked long and hard at the weapon, he was hard place to describe it was so unique. He'd only heard rumors of it's creation, but had come prepared just in case it was true.

"But isn't hydraulic power to large for a ZenKZ, let alone a side arm?"

Came the question from another Kim Min-jun. Haruto wasn't surprised to hear it as he'd paid him to ask it.

'And money well spent.' He thought as the Head Tech immediately pulled up a sophisticated algorithm.

"We used a series of compressions to get into to power a new model of weaponry. In fact, it's so impressive, it will be going into the Zhùróng heir's ZenKZ. Master Itachi has already demonstrated it's power to a small showing."

Haruto switched folders as he pulled up the algorithms. He wasn't stupid

enough to try to get past the firewalls that would be surrounding anything the heir himself would be using. But no one ever really thought of giving the same level of protection to the mathematical formulas that made said weapons. And he was not disappointed now, as he downloaded the whole folder.

“So,” The Head Tech closed out of the schematic leaving only the ZPS trademark fireballs moving up and down the screen. “that’s pretty much it for the weaponry tour. Any questions?” He asked already knowing there wouldn’t be.

‘*Blast.*’ Haruto thought as he hurriedly exited the terminal. He still needed to clean up his download history. As he’d piggybacked onto the Head Tech Suio’s log on, no one would think twice of him looking at these weapons files. They would, however, wonder why he needed to download any of those files, which meant Haruto needed to permanently erase that history. And he needed to do it while Suio was still logged in.

“Good,” he continued. “Now, as a general rule, if it explodes or lights up than ZPS was apart of that.” The Head Tech’s hand hovered over his BISM as he was in thought.

‘*Come on, come on, come on.*’ Haruto chanted.

“Well, expect for the Keepers equipment. They like to keep things in house.” The Head Tech continued.

Brat, you need to do something.

‘*I know.*’

So Haruto broke his stay quiet rule and said the first thing that came to mind, “Does that include the Moon Festival?”

“Huh?” The Head Tech looked in his direction, but couldn’t figure out which one of the three student all looking down said it. Out of the corner of his eyes, Haruto could see his hand moving away from his BISM. “The Moon Festival?” He questioned. “Yes. Yes.” He continued nodding his head. “While the Gento would like to take credit for everything that happens during the Moon Festival, it is us the great House of Fire here at the ZPS that does all of the fireworks indoor and out.”

The Head Tech smiled at something, “Of course, we don’t have to pay for the oxygen burned. Now that alone the Gento’s pay for.”

Just as the Head Tech was finishing, his tablet screen blinked off as he pulled out clean from the terminal.

“We also do the fairy lights.” The Head Tech continued as he closed out of his BISM pointing the students back the way they came. “Which is a great segue for next week’s project. Now that you all have learned the basics of what it means to by a pyrotech here at ZPS.”

Herding them along, Haruto shuffled into the middle of the pack. Blinding in with the rest. They made it to the clean room as they disrobed from their coveralls. “Now, the Corporal are all looking forward to your visit. They’ve got a lot planned for your last two weeks here, and I’m told the first assignment will be fairy lights.” He continued as he looked at his BISM screen. “Here’s the information.”

Haruto looked at his own BISM as if he'd received the information with the rest of the small class. As he was technically Kim Min-jun, or at least one of them. Haruto had to bounce his signal through three different BISM before it came to him encrypted. And not half a minute later, the assignment appeared.

"Now, study hard, and maybe someday, you'll count yourself a member of the ZPS." The Head Tech dismissed them.

Haruto followed the flow of exiting teens as he seamlessly blended in with his surrounding. The other Kim nodded to him as they parted ways. Haruto moving with the crowd who didn't so much as give him a second glance. Despite that he couldn't help but look to the rooftops.

Focus kid, QB9 began. **The rooftops are being watched. Stick with the plan.**

Haruto knew QB was right. They'd been walking out of the ZPS building for two weeks now with no problems. He just couldn't shake the feeling of uneasy walking around the Zhùróng district like this.

Nothing's going to happen while you look like this kid. QB9 continued surprisingly soothingly.

Haruto nodded as he weaved his way through the crowd at a brisk walk. There was no point in tempting fate. Breathing a sigh of relief once he'd exited the Zhùróng district, Haruto turned into a back alley. Shedding his face paint and prosthetic ears in one swift motion, he toss them in a nearby trash dispensary. It was a pity they were one time use objects.

Climbing up the side of the building, Haruto was finally at peace as he looked down at the little people from the rooftops. With a wide smile, he was off to LL and his new home base, the RL2 warehouse. From the rooftops, the trip back to the warehouse was a breeze.

'My new home away from home,' Haruto thought as he kneeled over his recently installed hatch. Aeliana had not been happy about the new installation when she'd first seen it. And, admittedly, he might have wanted to run it by her before he made modifications on the warehouse. But in his defense, every building aught to have rooftop access, so really he was doing her a favor. *'And it's a more secure entrance than the front door, so really, she has nothing to complain about.'* He thought.

Feeling QB9's agreement, Haruto popped the hatch open with a flash of his BISM. *'1024-bit arthorization key that re-generated every week. What's to complain about?'* He continued in his head. Jumping down he answered his own question, "Nothing."

Zing. Zing, zing, zing. Clink.

The sounds of Aeliana at her firing range greeting Haruto. Turning to the mini-fridge, he grapped a pouch of water and a fresh energy pack. While not MINOS, the stuff tasted okay.

And it's actually health for you. QB9 growled out. Haruto rolled his eyes in response.

'We're not having that argument again.' He thought as he popped open the water pouch. Taking a deep sip, he exhaled in wonder. The stuff was

like magic or something. Absolutely delicious. Real water was just, well it *had* a taste to it. And it was just something that even the synthetic stuff couldn't touch. Not that he'd had much opportunity to drink synthetic anyway. No orphan could.

The energy pack, which QB assured him was fruits, vegetables and nuts mashed together, downed as quickly as he could manage. **Quality food could hit you in the face and you still wouldn't appricated it.** QB9 complained.

'I'll have you know,' Haruto begin in his head as he headed out of the staff room to the main warehouse floor below. *'I have a fresh garden, so I know what this stuff is supposed to taste like.'* He took another long sip of his water before continuing, "And this is not it."

Better this than MINOS. QB9 countered.

Haruto ignored him knowing that a response would only devolve into an hour long argument at minimam. Instead, he serveyed the latest additions to the room. *'Are those PX-10000's?'* He thought as he looked over the three new shiny consoles. *'I didn't even know these were on the market.'*

Perks of being an Helian, I take it. QB9 replied, but he also sounded impressed.

Haruto spent the next ten minutes inspecting it. *'No, this won't due.'*

It shouldn't be that hard to disconnect them from the Kanopos network. QB9 commented.

Sitting back on his heels he nodded in agreement, *'No, but it must have*

cost a fortune to connect three of them.’ Haruto pointed to a thick bundle of wires. ‘*See that’s archival access and it’s linked to all three of them.’*

Can’t they get their money back for it? It’s not like we need three anyway. QB9 replied, grumpiness returning to his voice.

Haruto shrugged, ‘*Beats me.*’ Turning to the firing range, he yelled out, “Hey, do you mind if I disconnect one of these from the network?”

Aeliana finished her target, before turning to him, “What?”

Pointing to the console in question he continued, “Disconnect it.”

Aeliana gave him a look before returning to her firing range. For a moment, he thought she was going to ignore him, but surprisingly she pressed a button or two on her BISM and the whole range disassembled itself, collapsing into the far wall. ‘*That was not there yesterday.*’ He thought, but said nothing as Aeliana harnessed her blaster and walked toward him.

“Why would you want to disconnect from the network?” She questioned, her arms crossed in wieriness.

“Do you really want to know the answer to that question?” Haruto countered. She looked at him for a long moment, before shaking her head.

“Nothing you do better land back on the Guild. I’m serious Haruto.” She replied harshly.

Haruto crossed himself as he responded, “That’s why I need an offline computer.”

She sighed as she relaxed her position, “You know without access you

can do virtually nothing.”

“Nothing that can be traced.” Haruto replied evasively.

She shook her head, but nodded the okay. Haruto smiled as he kneeled in the back of the console setup already pulling out the network wiring.

“Don’t touch any of the other ones.” She continued.

“No problem,” his reply was muffled as he started the re-wiring process.

‘No, I’m going to want this re-routed here...’

“And try not to break it.” She added. “I don’t want to have to explain to my mother why I need another one.”

“Uh ah,” Haruto replied. *‘And this should go there...’*

“And this better not interfere with the warehouse security network.”

She continued. “I swear I have someone check that you didn’t just log into the Guild network.”

“Yeah,” he replied absentmindedly. *‘I think that should do it.’*

I have no complains. QB9 confirmed.

“I’m serious, Haruto.” Aeliana continued.

Haruto pulled himself out from behind the console. “I got that from the 101 demands.” Padding her softly on the shoulder he turned to the now offline console. “But honestly, nothing’s going to go wrong. I have my console offline just like this one.” He added. “Nothing’s gone wrong with that one.”

“Yet,” she muttered under her breath, but the console started up just fine. And more importantly, offline.

‘Good now I can work without worries.’ He thought already thinking of his latest biodegradable project.

I still don’t see why you need a chip that disappears. QB9 growl out.

‘You will in time.’ He thought as he sat down at the console and started setting up the security.

He could feel Aeliana’s eyes on him, but she didn’t say a word. She was like that keeping most of her thoughts to herself. He was just grateful she didn’t seem bothered about his currently dyed hair.

“Before you get distracted, I got something for you,” Aeliana spoke catching Haruto’s attention.

‘More stuff?’ He thought.

Don’t question gifts, kid. QB9 replied.

“Here,” she handed him a new XP3 tablet. “Don’t break it, alright. And no, it doesn’t have my lecture notes on them. That doesn’t seem to be helping you all that much so I put Interactive History modules on them.”

Taking the tablet gentle he smiled, “Cool.”

She snorted, “They’re technically for little kids, but given you have an attention span of a four year old, I figured it was the only thing that would really work. If you’re actually serious about OCI.”

“Completely,” Haruto answered as he looked her in the eyes, “and thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. It’s in basic characters, so you still might have

trouble on the tests. But Sergeant Sang-eo seems nice enough to let you take the exams in basic, so yeah.” She finished.

“Still, thank you.” Haruto replied seriously. He looked over at his computer before stepping away from it. “You know, if you need help with your relic stuff, I’m free now.”

She shook her head, “No, I’ve got a thing with my parents tonight. We’ll work on it tomorrow.”

Haruto nodded as he sat back down. Aeliana turning to go, she paused, “Oh, Tommy was able to locate a local source for that MINOS stuff you asked for. He should have it in later this week.”

Haruto whole face transformed, “Yosh!” He yelled as he fist pumped. Today just kept getting better.

Aeliana shook her head with a small smile, “I’m not touching that stuff, just so you know.” She replied. She turned back around and started heading for the door. “Anything that needs to tell you it’s eatable probably isn’t.” She called over her shoulder.

Haruto was going to argue with her, but she was already out of ear shout.

I'm really starting to like this Helian girl. QB9 commented. Clear pleasure in his voice.

“Oh, shut up you.” Haruto muttered to himself as he turned back to what was to be his console. ‘*Firewalls first, then a little Interactive History.*’ He continued in his head. He was going to be very busy tonight.

Part III

The Guild Princess

— 21 —

Aeliana tried not to tug on the synthetic cotton sleeve of her coverall. She hated wearing coveralls of any kind over her SKIM. No matter what material her parents bought for her, she always ended up with some kind of irritation. As such, she preferred the pilot fashion of wearing only MODs on her SKIM. And no matter how her time at KANP ended, she had no plans to join the current fashion of the Emperor's court and wear these ridiculous coveralls.

A steady hand came to her elbow as her mother gentle squeezed. "Dear please, it's only for the night." She spoke softly in her ear before letting go.

Her father took her place with a reassuring smile and gentle pat on the back, "Don't worry Stargazer, I've got Tommy preparing a nice bath for you when you get back. Should take care of the irritation."

She nodded at her father before forcing her hands away from the breathy material. '*I can do this.*' She chanted in her head. '*Just a few hours, and I can leave.*' She looked at the looming ship as they continued to approach. Flashing balls of fire in all kinds of colors lighting up space a signature of the Zhùróng clan. Why was she here again. Tugging on her father's

elbow, careful not to rip his dress coveralls she asked. “Why do you need me again?”

Her mother answered in his stead, “Dear we’re hardly going to have you moping about the house. Tommy can only take so much of it.”

“Than I’ll go to the warehouse.” She replied already looking forward to getting her coveralls off.

Her father smiled at her but shook his head, “I happened to mention to Lord Yuri*(Noble of Fire Nation) that you were on vacation. Even if you have no interest in the business.” Aeliana moved to correct him but he hushed her with a gentle smile. “I know my little Stargazer, but we all must play the Game.”

Aeliana sighed heavily. ‘*Best to get it out now.*’ She thought. The Game would not allow for such behavior.

“Get your jitters out too, and remember your training.” Her mother added as they pod slowed upon its approach. “They are all the enemy. And we,”

“Show no weakness to the enemy.” Aeliana continued. Her mother nodded pride clear in her eyes and small smile. Aeliana returned it as she shook out her body. A method her father had showed her in preparation for the Game. He too was shaking his body. Rolling his shoulders, and taking deep breaths. She copied him while her mother looked on. Mother was a natural at the Game. Aeliana just hoped she wouldn’t need to play it often.

Once their pod docked, she heard the shift of pressure as their pod sync with the main ship, but felt nothing as her SKIM reacted to equalize pressure. Gravity must have shifted as well because the hard clank of her SKIM boots attaching themselves to the metal of the pod rang clear. They waited a moment longer before the door opened. ‘*6.2 sec decompress.*’ She thought as she followed her parents into the ship. ‘*That put this ship as an E class cruiser. Not bad for the Zhùróngh, but probably their best merchant ship.*’

The feet continued to clang as they walked. Not everyone could afford gravity in greeting chambers, she knew even the Sakhalin clan didn’t use them, but that wasn’t from lack of money. Some how, she got the sense that if the Zhùróngh could afford it, then at least *this* ship would have then installed.

She looked at her father, to see him slightly green. He had a weak stomach, so all of their main ships had to have them, which was a small expense for her father’s comfort as far as she was concerned. She mother held his arm gentle as they reached the anti-chamber. A second decompress and reintroduction to gravity and that door opened to a lift. A stiff looking Zhùróngh grabbed man greeted them.

“Invitation.” The requested wasn’t really a question, but Aeliana was hardly surprised.

Her mother held out her BISM for the man to scan before he activated the lift. Less than a second later, soft music greeted them as they stepped

out into the main hall and the party proper.

“Enjoy the party, Master and Mistress Helian.” He replied just as stiffly before the lift shut and so her only exit.

The room was lavishly decorated. Clearly no expense had been spared for the event. She followed closely behind her parents as they moved into the thick of it. Her mother believed in being fashionable late to these kinds of things. Nothing begins until the Helian have arrived. At least not when it came to the business of the Guild. And this was no exception.

As soon as they arrived, business associates streamed to her mother as if this was a Helian event. Without conscious effort, the hoard around her mother pushed both her and her father to the side. Her father wasn’t the little bit upset either. *‘And why would dad be? He hates these things as much as I do. Maybe more.’* She thought as she absently grabbed one of the metal cups from a passing server, human server. The bore expression on his face wasn’t as devoid of emotions as he’d probably intended.

Bring the cup her lips he father halted her, “You’re not going to like it.” He spoke under his breath. She wrinkled her brow in question. “They try, but always second best when it comes to the clans.” He looked around, but seeing that mother was still engaged relaxed.

She took a small sip and understood at once his meaning. And knew he shouldn’t have voiced it aloud. At least now *here*. In the cup, was a water. Something that would pass for real water to those who drank synthetic or recycled on the regular. But that was not her. “Dad.” She admonished. He

nearly shrugged before remembering that they were supposed to be playing the Game. He gave a goofy smile instead.

“It’s true.” He continued. “Always a step behind, or two.” There was a little malicious in his voice, but Aeliana wrote it off for his discomfort at playing the Game.

He was right of course. She would be sipping on this cup of water for the rest of the night. As nothing could compare to the real stuff, but the Zhùróng would have the majority of their guest fooled and those they didn’t wouldn’t matter as they were beyond the reach of the Zhùróng. Because no matter how hard they tried, the Zhùróng would always play second fiddle to the Gento. Their servers could try to copy the Gento mannerism all they liked, but they would fall short. Just as this party would likely be outshined by anything the Gento would have.

“Are the Gento clan having an event?” She asked her father. It would be just like the Zhùróng to rush a party so that their could happen first. Or to at least capitalize on envoys that were hear for a Gento event. She’d gotten a glimpse of the royal envoy just a moment ago. Looking around now, she found the woman talking animatedly with her mother. There wasn’t a single occasion that would have the Royal Envoy here for the Zhùróng outside of being in the area.

“Not this cycle.” He caught her eye line. “Oh no, Tsuyomi is here for the Kōtaishi’s fourteen birthday.” Her father answered her unasked question. “I’m surprised she had time for this event. She must have arrived early

this year.” His eyes took on a look of sudden understanding as he looked around again. She wondered if he would mention it here, but doubted it. Whatever it was, would be discussed later with her mother as part of Guild business.

The pair fell into silence as the servers bought around elaborate dishes that Aeliana was sure would be an imitation of the real thing. Her father took sampling pieces and tried not to make a face at any of it. With any luck, the Zhùróng would follow the norm and have a buffet as well with at least a few simpler dishes. ‘*Those should be impossible to mess up.*’ She thought as took a small sip of her fake water.

Gong sound.

Aeliana looked for it. A path formed in the mingling crowd as the drumming continued. The famous Fire Troop made their way to the stage.

“Ah finally,” her father muttered as he shifted to the stage. She’d seen them only once and from a far. Ilia had never been impressed with them and had seen no reason to watch their performances during festivals. So they always watched the Gento Clan’s Moon Troop instead.

Personally, she liked them both equally. And on rare events, the Fire Troop was known to use real fire. Although she’d never seen it. The Fire Troop preforms using real fire. Aeliana is impressed. Masaru appear on stage to give a speech. Her father leans over to whisper in her ear.

“I wonder how much that cost them?”

She tried to do the calculation in her head, but forgot the current market

price for oxygen. Embarrassed at the lost of information she just gave her father a small smile. '*I can't believe I've forgotten the price of oxygen.*' She thought as he tuned back into the Zhùróng clan head's speech. '*I'll have to remember to go over the market price for the essentials. I can't let my studies get in the way for finances.*' She could just see the horror on her mother's face if she knew.

Aeliana was so lost in her thoughts, she missed the end of Masaru's speech. "Alright my little Stargazer, I better get out there and socialize or I'll hear about it later tonight. Try to stay out of trouble." He squeezed her arm before moving into the thick of it.

Aeliana moved to where she could see servers pulling out the buffet. Half way too it, she was stopped by none other than Akihiko.

"Hey." He gave her a small smile that looked more like a smirk. "Your parents drag you to this too?"

She looked briefly to the buffet table and the long line forming, knowing she'd missed her chance. Turning to Akihiko she gave him a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Unfortunately. Vacation time, can't really get out of it."

He nodded as he took a sip of his drink. His eyes finding his father and older brother across the room. "Father expects me here during vacation as well."

"At least I don't have to go to the Clan events too. This cycle is packed with them it seems." Aeliana added without thought. Her mind on Ilia's

Clan schedule despite herself. Thinks about what Ilia would be doing now. Remembers she has eight events during her vacation, although none today (one tomorrow).

“Not as much as you’d think.” Akihiko replied snapping her out of her thoughts of Ilia. She turned to see his eyes still on his father and brother.

“No?” She questioned.

“As the second son, father only expects me to go to these business events.” He continued. Aeliana could read between the lines. His father didn’t want him at the clan events. She wasn’t sure what to say to that so her eyes went down.

A sickly green screen flashed on Akihiko’s BISM as he clinched his fist. She blinked in surprised. *‘That almost looked like the symbol Hermes had.’* She thought, *‘But someone like Akihiko wouldn’t need help from someone like him.’*

Looking at his BISM screen now, the Zhùróng fire balls bounced back and forth. It was probably nothing. A trick of the light.

“I’m to be the good little boy. Go to OCI, pilot for five or so years, then retire and work for the business.” Akihiko continued lost in his own thoughts. “But I’ll show him.” He spoke with a firm determination as he eyes met hers. “We’ll show people like that. Prove them the fool for underestimating *us*.”

Aeliana smiled tightly in response. *‘As if we are even close to being in the same position.’* She thought darkly. He had some nerve comparing

their situations, but she had her Game face on now and would not make the mistake of showing her true feelings now. '*Everyone is the enemy*' She chanted her mother's words back.

"Anyway," he smiled at her a little more openly. "I don't think I've gotten to the chance to say how sorry I am about your break with Cadet Amur."

Aeliana took a sip of water to stop her initial reaction at the comment. '*Maybe because I avoid you like the plague at KANP.*' She thought bitterly. Her voice was light when she spoke, "It happens. People change, and grow in different directions."

Akihiko shrugged as if no one had taught him how to play the Game. "Still, I'm sorry." He continued, "I know what it's like to be alone. And can understand why you would choose the company of those less desirable to loneliness."

Aeliana took another sip of water to cool her temper. Sure sometimes she wanted to strangle Haruto for any number of reasons, but he was hardly 'undesirable' because of it. "Cadet Hēidòng is a surprisingly great study pattern." She replied instead of something nastier.

Akihiko snorted at her comment. "Come on, it's just us. You don't have to pretend." He replied with a roll of his eyes. "I just want to say that even someone like Amur wasn't good enough for someone with your talents and pedigree." He puffed up his chest probably unconsciously as Aeliana imagined ten different ways to disembowel him as she continued to give him

a soft smile.

“You flatter me.” She replied airily. As she made a mental note to buy several cut outs of him for her gun range. *‘I can’t want to shot that smug smile off your face tomorrow.’*

“I’m only speaking the truth. Someone like you should align yourself with someone more prestigious. Someone with weight to his family name, with connections that matter.” He continued smug smile never leaving his face.

“I try not to chose my friends for their family name.” She replied with a smile on her face and a soft laugh to soften her otherwise harsh words.

“Considering your situation, you might reconsider it.” Akihiko replied.

“I’m sorry?” Aeliana questioned politely.

“OCI and getting into pilot school.” Akihiko replied shortly. She could not hid the dark light to her eyes that Akihiko clearly caught as he continued. “At this point, connections matter more than skill, which is why if I were you, I’d spend less time with the dead last, and more time with those that matter.”

Ignoring some of his statements, “Cadet Heidòng is hardly dead-last now.”

Akihiko snorted, “No, but it would be nearly impossible for him to get his grades up enough for passing.” Akihiko countered.

Aeliana tilted her head as if in agreement. *‘Only a fool underestimates Haruto.’* She thought. “What are you proposing?”

“Simple.” He started. “Something Amur probably didn’t even think to offer.”

“*Cadet* Amur?” Aeliana corrected as if in question.

Akihiko frowned but continued. “Yes, Cadet Amur’s family is small and depended on the grace of the Sakhalin clan. I, however, can use my father’s power and influence to get you into pilot school.”

Aeliana raised her eyebrows in question, “In exchange for?”

“Five or maybe three years if my career lunges well, of you as *my* head tech.” Akihiko answered forcing Aeliana to sip at her nearly empty cup of fake water to hid her initial reaction. “Together,” he continued, “we’d be an unstoppable force. And once I’ve made a name for myself, my father will want me to continue as a pilot to bring great honor to our clan. It will be only a matter of whispering to the right people to get you into an OCI program.”

He looked at her expectantly, “That is assuming I don’t get into OCI on my own.”

He nodded, “Giving you talents and abilities, it really is a pity that you were born in my year.”

“That also assumes that if I don’t get into OCI, I won’t simply turn my attention to the Guild.” She continued.

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. “That would be a waste of your talents, but always an option.” Before she could reply he continued. “I don’t want you to think you must have an answer now. Something should

be considered with great weight.” He clinched his fist as he spoke, but Aeliana did not see that sickly green again in his BISM. “No, this is an open invitation. I can wait for your answer up until I have to go to OCI.”

And there was no doubt in his voice that *he* and not she would be going. She held back a sigh as she finished her fake water. “Then I will have to think about it.”

“Of course.” He replied. A small smile creep onto his face as he continued, “And if you’d like proper company for lunch, I would be pleased to replace Amur’s company.” He looked her up and down with a predatory look. “I’m sure I will make better company in that regard as well.”

Unable to control her frown, she held her metal cup, for once glad that the Zhùróng clan could not afford glass, to cover her mouth as if she were flustered at his advance. Inside she was seething. As if *anyone* could replace Ilia. She wanted to spit in his face. To rage at his audacity, to think that she would want him in that way. But she couldn’t for this was still the Game so instead she said. “If I can pull myself from my much needed study given my natural disadvantage, then I will have to consider it.”

He smiled as if she’d said yes. Probably to him everything was a yes. He bowed slightly to her, “I must be going. Socializing.” He spoke as if they were sharing a secret.

Raining her face in she pulled the metal cup way with a weak smile, “See you around, Cadet.”

Suddenly having lost her appetite, she looked for a server to replace her

cup of water. What she wouldn't give for something stronger? But she knew that any party that served 'real' water, would not have the budget for liquor of the same quality. With another cup of the nasty stuff in hand, her eyes scanned the room. She was not surprised to find Akihiko in the middle of a group of girls around their age. They didn't have class with him six days out of the week.

He caught her eye and waved. She waved back as was expected of her. '*I hope my mother didn't see that.*' She thought to herself. If there was one person, who would find this whole situation even more displeasing then it would be her mother, and Aeliana was not in the mood to deal with her mother in her Game face.

A light touch to her elbow caused her to turn into her mother's waiting eyes. But fate seemed to have other plans for her tonight. "Mother is the Royal Envoy doing well?" Aeliana asked trying to put off the inevitable conversation.

"Little Tsuyomi is happy to have the honor of attending the Kōtaishi's fourteen birthday in the name of the Shàngdì again this year." Her mother replied easily. "I see that you've spoke to Masaru's second son. I'm told he has a head for business. Is that true?"

Her mother guided her to a more crowded section of the party as she spoke. Aeliana felt her BISM buzz.

"Ah," Looking down at it, she was surprised to see a message from her mother.

I'm moving us to a more private place to talk.

The loud crowd meant that her mother had to lean in to her to be heard, but still this was hardly the place *she* would have considered 'private'. She messaged her mother back not sure when the woman had even written her something. 'Do we have to do this now?' She wrote.

"Aeliana, dear. Your mother is talking to you. Can your little friends not wait a moment?" Her mother replied as she gentle pulled Aeliana's arm down. Her arm buzzed again, but her mother had a firm grip on her wrist. A flash of light pulled her to the metal pillar glossed for the party tonight. Her mother angled her arm, and suddenly she saw the new message in the reflection.

The Game, dear. And yes. I need to know if I need to put out some fires before your father finds out about his.

"I'm sorry mother. What was it that you were saying?" Aeliana replied as her mother let her wrist go.

"It's just that you and Cadet Zhùróng seem to be getting along well. I wondered if you knew if this rumor was true or not." Her mother said. A buzz and new message said another story.

Of all the people to replace Amur, you had to pick him?

"Cadet Zhùróng and I were just sharing are boredom together. Honestly mother, you know I spend all of my time studying. I couldn't tell you anything personal about most of my classmates including Cadet Zhùróng. Well," she paused in thought, "at least not outside whatever one else knows.

He ranks second in our class behind only myself.”

“He is such a nice young man, I’m surprised you don’t spend more time with him.” Her mother replied. Aeliana didn’t need her mother’s next message to read between those lines.

“He’s a natural, while I must spend hours studying. We don’t really cross paths except for tonight.” Aeliana said aloud, and hoped that her mother heard the underlining meaning. ‘*And only tonight.*’

“Well do try to talk to others as well.” Her mother said it as a suggestion, but Aeliana knew it to be a command. ’Akihiko can’t be the only one you talk to tonight.’ Was implied from her tone.

“Of course mother. Please don’t let me keep you.”

Her mother gave her a wide smile before moving on. A buzz told her, however, that she was not done.

And if you must associate with a Clan, I’d prefer it was that Amur girl. As nothing good ever comes from aligning oneself with the Zhùróng. Aeliana read the message without the use of the reflective surface now that her mother had gone. She tightened her jaw in frustrations. Opening a new box to send a message to...

Closing it quickly, she turned to the room in search of people in her age group. ‘*I will not start messaging Ilia, just because my mother is being overly pushy.*’ Aeliana thought as she made her way across the room. And the last thing she wanted to do was socialize with girls who would talk about only boys and the latest fashion. Not when it made her think of the

last time she'd been to one of these events.

Then, she'd spent the whole time messaging Ilia. They'd done that for each other. Aeliana would bar herself in her room waiting for Ilia to complain about her Clan events, and Ilia would do the same during one of Aeliana's civilian events. She'd been able to get through anything and everything like that. But now...

'Now, I've just got to entertain myself.' She thought as she smiled and nodded to the conversation going on around her. For a moment she considered messaging Haruto, but dismissed the thought. It just felt wrong for some reason. Haruto was a friend, yes. But he wasn't Ilia. *'At least he wasn't trying to replace her either.'*

He had his own thing going on with the Kōtaishi, his Princess, anyway. *'And perhaps, I should stop pretending that what Ilia and I had was just friendship.'* She thought. "Perhaps," she whispered under her breath. No one paid any attention to her though.

— 22 —

Helian New Years Party, Haruto is invited.

Haruto meets Aeliana's parents?? That would work here, but I'm not sure House of Fire works for the title. Might have to try to work in something else entirely?

A dinner date with Anko and Iruka? Got to get a gift for his best friend? No myster over why security has been increased, by-the-by.

Probably talking to Hinata during one of her important meetings. That would be cool here!! Like a mirror of what Aeliana had with Ilia.

Could try a different day, where the Uchiha's have to show up. Hinata's actual breathing day? Good way to introduce breathing day. Although Haruto now needs a gift...

Should be some teasing about the prank Haruto plans to pull. Back and forth with Hinata.

(Must end with a proper introduction to the Guild Princess. (Meeting Aeliana's parents is the best way.)

— 23 —

Aeliana and Ilia are walking toward the warehouse. Ilia is jealous of all the time Aeliana spends with Haruto, so Aeliana is showing her the place.

-here I want to talk about the SKIMs

-I also want a little bit of an arguement about the DOMAINE
maybe some other stuff...

once there get there, Haruto turns things down, and moves to leave...

Aeliana asks him to fix her BISM, interference (easier than going to a
Keeper Tower)

-Haruto forgot to tell the Princess about it...

-Aeliana mad, because this is not a footnote activity...

...here we get into the other network... Aeliana will look into it... (speak
to Erik, but he won't take her seriously)

<Aeliana's point-of-view>

Haruto rushed into the classroom just as Sergeant Sang-eo was returning. Setting back into his seat, he could help the smile that graced his lips.

“Man, what did you have massive diarrhea?” Seo-Jun asked.

“Ha!” Haruto laughed at the easy way out. “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you, is all I’m saying.” Haruto replied in a non-answer.

Good kid, make that alibi stronger. QB9 replied as Haruto surveyed the room. Seo-Jun was already looking away with a shake of his head. Only Aeliana was giving him a search look. He smiled back at her just as Sergeant Sang-eo started class.

Haruto tuned out most of it as he looked out the window. He did this so often, no one would think anything off about it. But today, he wasn’t looking out at Sanctuary Park. No, his eyes lay squarely at the observation deck. Soon enough his prank would take into effect.

‘Hey, how long do you think it will take.’ He questioned.

It’ll take as long as it’ll take. Now quiet, I’m trying to record the

lecture. Someone has to make sure you have comprehensible notes.

QB9 growled.

“...which is why we have the OCI program to begin with.” Sergeant Sang-eo paused in his lecture probably to gather his thoughts as the man lacked any form of dramatics that could make his lectures interesting. “Now, today the OCI...” He continued, but was interrupted as the class locked down.

‘*And it begins.*’ Haruto thought as he masked his face in surprise. Looking around like everyone as the emergency Halo screen begin to descend.

“What’s going on?” Someone muttered. The class erupting into confusion and concern. As the old man’s face showed long and solemn. Movement out the windowed showed that the Commander’s Halo was also descending.

‘*This is just perfect.*’ Haruto thought as he continued to look shocked with the rest of the class.

“I don’t have a drill scheduled. Do you Yú?” Sergeant Sang-eo asked to Sergeant Yú.

“No, Sang-eo. Something must be wrong.” Sergeant Yú replied.

This is not a joke, or a game. The screen flickered as the old man continued. **Ready yourself.** Haruto had taken a recording of the old man during his weekly lectures to splice together this piece of art.

Sergeant Yú turned to the class in response. “Prepare to enter battle stations, Cadets.”

“Yes, sir.” Haruto replied along with the rest of class trying to hold back his own smile.

On cue, QB9's laughter rang low and clear. '*See!*' Haruto thought pointedly. '*I told you, you sound menacing on the regular.*'

I can hardly change my voice to suit you. QB9 replied, but Haruto could feel his pleasure as the faces in his class gave him a withering look as they all immediately disconnected from the KANP network with light curses muttered under their breath. Haruto maintained his innocent one knowing it would probably fool no one.

'As if I'd hit the same system over again.' Haruto thought in disbelief. Even Aeliana was disconnecting. '*Surely she knows that's a pranking rule!*' He continued in his head.

I thought you called those training rules... QB9 replied.

'Wha? Of course, I meant training.' Haruto quickly covered up, but he could feel that QB9 didn't believe him.

They must think you're pretty good, to hack back into the KANP network after all of those security enhancements.

Haruto eventually decided it might look weird if he was the only one still logged into the network, so disconnected with the rest of class. '*Well, technically we did.*' He replied to QB9.

The bathroom? QB9 questioned. **That hardly counts.** He added bitterly.

'Don't be mad, I didn't let you do the hack.' Haruto replied as Kur-ram was giving him a hard look before turning to his BISM, probably to run a diagnostic on it. Amur looked at him briefly before taking Kenta's BISM

and connecting it to hers likely to run her own diagnostics. ‘*The terminal was your test. As long as that goes well than we can talk.*’

IF it goes well. QB9 raged. **My side was perfect, and ten, no hundred times faster than anything you could do!** He continued. **You should be begging me to do all of the hacks!**

‘*You every well no I’m not taking any chances.*’ Haruto replied back completely forgetting about the class around him. ‘*If we’re caught, do you know how many felonies we, I commented?*’

The only reason we get caught is because your human body left some clue to our involvement. QB9 countered.

Their argument was interrupted by the screen door opening revealing a pair of Keepers. Haruto turned his attention and was a little surprised he’d miss the change from the old man’s face to his signature black-hole on the emergency screen.

“Excuse us Sergeant,” the closer Keeper spoke short on breath. “But is Cadet Hēidòng here?” He continued as he managed to catch his breath.

‘Finally,’ Haruto thought as he turned his attention to the practiced words he’d prepared for this encounter.

“Yes, Cadet Hēidòng is here,” Sergeant Sang-eo responded hesitantly still not used to Haruto’s prank ways interrupting class time. Haruto was sure the man would get better at it as he never knew when he’d have to pull a smaller prank on some rude shopkeeper.

“What’s the idiot done this time?” Akihiko questioned, his arrogant

voice loud among the mostly silent classroom.

Now normally, Haruto dislike the other boy with a passion, he was rather moody and detached. Seemed to be bothering Aeliana all of the time. But for the first time, Haruto actually want to thank the Gods for his birth. Maybe even kiss him for all the help. Haruto didn't even care if the asshole calling him names in the process.

“Despite the stick up his butt, *Akihiko's* managed to ask a good question.” Haruto responded trying to control his predatory smile. “Will wonders never cease?”

“Why you...” Akihiko growled out, but Haruto continued over him.

“What are you accusing me of doing? Falsely might I add now in front of all of these witnesses.” He continued as he looked around the room. Puffing his chest out as he stood letting his classmates act as a jury.

Kid, if this OCI stuff doesn't work out. You might want to take up acting. Or legal counsel or something. QB9 commented. **Even I'm starting to believe you, and I helped with the prank.**

“Cadet Hēidòng, we have a warrant for your arrest for the involvement of the illegal hack of the Commander’s Halo. A capital offense as you know.” The Keeper answered.

“If you come without a fight will make a note in your defense.” A second Keeper made her presence known at that moment as they both moved into the room.

“Now, wait just a minute. I've been sitting here, with the rest of the

class trying to not fall asleep to Sergeant Sang-eo's lecture." Haruto turned to the coloring Sergeant as he continued, "Sorry Sergeant, but you're a snooze fest." He replied with a good-natured smile, gaining a small grin from the Sergeant in question.

"I'll have to work on that then, Cadet Hēidòng." He replied. Haruto would mark that as another point in the man's favor later.

Haruto nodded to the man before turning back to the Keepers, "So, I've been here. I watched this prank happen with everybody else." He took this moment to point to his classmates as he spun in place. "So, clearly I couldn't have done it." He continued crossing his arms in dramatic protest. "I know my rights. You have to have some cause before you can arrest me."

He finished with a flourish.

"I think the Hēidòng black-hole will work in this instance," the female Keeper countered.

'Okay, so you're the smart one.'

They still don't have anything on us. QB9 countered.

'The black-hole is enough for an arrest, though.'

Why use it if you knew they could arrest us for it. QB9 growled.

'Arrest, sure. But they can't hold me for it.' He replied. Aloud he continued his protest, although weakly. "Everyone knows that's my Clan symbol. It's public record."

"But it's enough." She continued.

"You'd be surprised how easily the Sakrá gives warrants for your arrest

when you've written your name all over the prank." The man Keeper added sarcastically.

Haruto placed his hands dramatically over his heart. "You wound me. The old man loves me more than that." He continued, but he knew he was just buy time. For what? Nothing, but the fun of it.

"Will you come willingly, Cadet?" The male Keeper asked his voice saying he hoped Haruto didn't.

"Wait let me get this straight." Seo-Jun interrupted taking his feet off the desk in front of him, "You think Haruto did *that*," he pointed to the Commander's Halo which still showed the Hēidōng black-hole. "Like I get how everything is normally Haruto's fault, but no way he can do that in less than five minutes." Seo-Jun continued. "Sorry bro, but you're not *that* good."

"Never said I was." Haruto replied with a little bow. "So, I ask again. How can you arrest me, when I was having lunch with Seo-Jun during the time it would have taken to 'hack' the old man's big screen?" He continued.

"That is not for us to determine. The warrant has already been issued." The female Keeper replied with the Keeper monotone. She was good. Haruto would give her that. He imagined she'd be bumped from her patrol unit soon enough despite how poorly this was going to go for the Keepers.

"Man that's messed up. The dude couldn't have been in two places at one like some kinda ghost hacker or like rider or something." Seo-Jun

replied as he leaned back in his chair turning to address Haruto directly he shook his head in bewilderment. “I can’t believe they can just take you up for nothing, bro.” He continued in deep thought. “Mom’s going to hear about this for sure. I’ll make sure they don’t keep you long.” He continued. Haruto couldn’t hold his surprise. While he ate lunch and did some smaller pranks with Seo-Jun every once in a while, he never really considered them close.

Don’t be so surprised you have more than one friend kid. QB9 grumbled out. **Even I’m starting to like you.** Haruto smiled in response. **Hey, don’t go soft on me or anything. I’m still getting my own body.**

Aloud Haruto spoke to both of them, “Thanks.”

Before he could say more; however, the female Keeper moved the conversation along. “I’m sure you will be called to testify about the Cadet’s whereabouts later, for now.” The female Keeper gestured for Haruto to follow them. “If you will?”

“Alright, alright. I know when I’ve been beat. But I’ll expect compensation for this unjustifiable arrest.” Haruto replied knowing the old man would get him something nice on the Keepers units.

As he was going willingly, Haruto didn’t expect them to SKIM link him. So, he was a little surprised when they reached the KANP arches and the male Keeper linked their SKIMs together.

“Just in case.” He replied. Looking up he continued, “We got him Captain. ETA five minutes.” The pair nodded to some command before

they were off.

A handful of seconds later and everything went black. “Star dust!” Haruto cursed.

“Language, Cadet.” The female Keeper admonished him.

Was that suppose to happen? QB9 questioned.

‘Heck no.’ Haruto replied. A hard rumble reaches Haruto’s sensitive ears as the backup generates kick in. The lights flicker back on but the Commander’s Halo flickers off. ‘*What in the world did they just do?*’

“Yes, ma’am. We’ll take it at a run.” The female Keeper replied as Haruto was lifted off the ground by mister grumpy.

“You’ve really done it now Hēidòng.” The man replied his voice giving away his anger.

‘And he’ll be on patrol for the rest of his career.’ Haruto thought as he was held away. Today was going to be a long night no matter what Seo-Jun told his mom. ‘Hey, QB?’

What kid?

‘I kinda of like the Ghost Rider.’ He continued as he remembered what Seo-Jun had called the it. He could feel QB9’s irritation causing Haruto to smile widely as he was manhandled to Tower One. Yeah, this prank was already topping the KANP incident.

— 25 —

Aeliana was weightless. Every nerve seemed to be firing at a rapid concession. She was heavy and light, muscles straining but working in effortless form. It was exhilarating.

The feeling wasn't new to her. No, every day she had the opportunity to experience the dueling sensations. Here, as an extension of her ZenKZ, a deadly beauty fit for the Helian heir, she was a fighter, a *Pilot* for the Jade Empire.

The weightless effect dueling feelings from the limited gravity within her ZenKZ-D, but also the mental heaviness associated with harnessing its great power. Her nerves were on fire because they were extended into her machines interface system. Her arms were no longer her arms, her body just an extension of something bigger, stronger, faster, than anything it could achieve even with enhancements. Every muscle strained under the pressure of 50 kilos of force. And it all felt *so* good.

"Foreign signatures incoming, ma'am," a static female voice relayed over her comms system.

"Roger. Moving into position," Aeliana responded as she moved her

elegant machine into a group of asteroid debris. She was, after all, on patrol near the Nahua border for a reason. The Sakrá didn't send his Ace Pilots just anywhere.

"One moment, ma'am. Commander Hēidòng must have missed a few, because I'm reading three additional signatures," the woman, who was clearly Aeliana's Head Technician, static voice relayed over the comms. "We'll need to recalculate maneuvers."

'Figures Haruto let some get away.' Aeliana thought. To her Technician she replied, "No time, I'll adjust on my end."

"But ma'am," the woman protested, her name escaping Aeliana, but she didn't have time to question it as the signatures were finally showing up on her radar.

"I've got this, trust me." Aeliana answered as she adjusted her position slightly to stay out of radar signal. Just like a game of Komi, she used the asteroid debris to maneuver her opponents into vulnerable positions. Her mind already re-creating their positions in a mental 3D grid.

'Yeah, that should work.' She thought as she let half the force pass her position. *'3, 2, 1. Let's go!'*

Shooting out of cover, she disabled the first two ships before they had time to raise their shields. The next two had enough time to release a laser defense grid, but she hadn't planned to bring the fighting in close. Dodging the opposing fire, she charged her rail gun as she maneuvered the two ships into a linear path.

‘*There!*’ Fire! The blasted them to pieces.

Her last three ships, surrounded her. Class E fighters weren’t anything to snuff at. ‘*No wonder Haruto had so much trouble.*’ She thought.

She dances around the laser fire. ‘*Intense.*’ She thought as a laser clipped her. At this rate, she was going to end up in pieces. ‘*I’ve got to think of something.*’

Doing some quick course calculation, she comes up with a plan. Uses the asteroid debris to misdirect, and is able to take the fighters out one at a time.

“Amazing!” Aeliana hears over the comms as the fighting dies down.

Aeliana smiles, but doesn’t degrade herself by using one of Haruto’s one-liners. “Returning to base. My baby’s going to need some repairs.”

“Oh, of course.” The woman replied. Aeliana could hear her flush in embarrassment. ‘*Yeah, this is the life.*’

A moment later and Aeliana found herself striding down the main hall of her support ship. Ahead of her, she entered the main deck. “Commander present!” Someone called out as everyone came to attention.

“At ease.” Aeliana replied turning to the closest Tech. “Is Commander Hēidòng back yet?”

“No ma’am, he’s still out on a patrol run.” Aeliana nodded at the information before taking a seat at the helm. As the top ranked Pilot, she captained this ship.

“Status report,” she commanded.

“Ma’am!” Man came to salute in front of her. Holding a tablet he read off, “Your Head Tech is currently leading repairs on your ZenKZ, ma’am. She reported that you should be back out there in a matter of days.”

Aeliana nodded, “Good. Make sure she runs balances adjustments. She felt a bit off today.”

“Yes, ma’am!” He replied as he tapped away. “And..” He trailed off.

“What is it?” She asked curiously.

“Well,” he said with a bright smile that he shared with the crew. “The rankings are in, and we,” he somehow straightened even more, “are the proud crew of the number one ranked Pilot for the third straight year.”

The crew whooped in excitement.

“Settle down, settle down.” Aeliana commanded with a small smile. “If you guys get this excited every time I get an award, you’ll be drunk every day.” The crew hollered louder at that. “Drinks on me tonight.” She addressed the man debriefing her before standing up. The crew got more done with her out of the room, honestly.

“It’s an honor to be working with someone with your credentials,” the man continued as he saluted her off the deck. Aeliana nodded in response. It was probably true. *‘Top of my KANP and OCI class, now the number one ranked Pilot of KTS Kanopos. I really have come far.’* She thought as she made her way off the deck floor.

“Please tell me you didn’t start a party without me.” Haruto’s voice sounded in her ears.

"I thought you were still on patrol." Aeliana answered back smoothly.

"QB's handling it." He replied easily, "And you didn't answer me. What's going on in there."

"Rankings got in," Aeliana replied smugly, "You can't blame me if they go wild for me."

Haruto snorted in response. "That's what we're calling it now, huh?" He chuckled at the idea. "Anyway, can you write up the report for this one? Meet with the old man and everything. I've got a thing, when we make it back."

"Yeah, a *thing*." She parroted knowing his *thing* was probably a date with his Princess. "Yeah, why not."

"Yatta!" He yelled back, "You're such a life saver. I owe you big time for this."

"Hey," She says before he can close the comm-link. "Do you know if..."

Even now, she couldn't finish the sentence. She and Ilia hadn't been, well anything for so long, but after getting into OCI had made things worse if possible. Now, well. She was glad that they had vastly different flight schedules. And hoped it wasn't by choice. Haruto would know all this, but more importantly because of his close connection with the Kōtaishi, he'd also knew everyone's schedules. His Princess sure seemed to anyway.

"Ah, give me a sec." He replied and half a second later he replied, "Yeah, their ship is supposed to be docked for, huh?"

"Huh?" Worry entered her voice.

"Well doesn't give a leave date. Maybe there're in transition or something." He replied optimistically.

"Yeah, maybe." She replied, but her voice was hallow, "Hey, don't let me keep you." She continued before cutting off there link. Turning into her room, she braced herself on the wall. The worst case surrounding her thoughts.

'*Transition?*' Not for the famous Amur-Krai-Sakhalin ship formation. The only other reason for a missing departure date, was...

"Goddess protect her." Aeliana whispered in pray as she closed her eyes.

Opening them, she found herself stumbling out of a bar. "Yeah, know." She slurred. "You know, they won't even let me on the flotilla!"

"Yeah, I know." Haruto replied softly as he helped her up.

"How," hiccup, "dare they," She continued. "I'm her, I'm her," She stumbled but Haruto held her upright.

"Yeah, I know."

"What have I done?" She whispered. "If only." She shook her head, "If I was *there*."

"You couldn't have known." Haruto replied. "And you know they wouldn't break up the Amur-Krai-Sakhalin formation."

"Yes, but," hiccup. "If I'd just been her Head Tech." She whined. "I could, I could've," she stumbled again tears building at the corner of her eyes. "They wouldn't even let me go to the ceremony." She cried.

"Yeah, I know." Haruto replied sympathetically, "But you can't place

the blame on yourself.”

“If I were, if I were her Head Tech,” she tried to counter, but Haruto interrupted.

“You’d have had to go to that Tech school. Would you have rather never be a Pilot just because there was a possibility you could have saved her.” Haruto shook his head.

“Yes!” She cried out. “Because I could’ve, *would* have.” She continued. “And we would have had so much more *time*.”

Beep, beep, beep. A buzzing sounded.

“You couldn’t have known, Aeliana.” Haruto continued. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

Beep, beep, beep.

“No, no!” Aeliana pulled herself up, “I just need one more drink.” Haruto looked skeptical, “For the fallen. Just one more.”

Beep, beep, beep.

“Alright, but let’s do this at my house.” He replied. She closed her eyes as she nodded.

Beep, beep, beep.

“What is that noise?” She called out, but when she opened her eyes she was alone. “Haruto?”

Beep, beep, beep.

“Ah,” Aeliana woke in a dry sweat.

Beep, beep, beep.

“What in the world?” She questioned to no one as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Half expecting the beeping to continue, she was surprised not to hear anything more. “Well, I’m not getting back to sleep after *that*.” She said aloud as she pulled herself out of bed. ‘*I might as well get a drink of water.*’ She thought as she exited her room. ‘*Or ask Tommy for a Stargazer Special.*’

Pausing at the top of the stairs, she tilted her head in concentration.

“Y... I...” Murmured conversation reached her.

‘*Is someone at the door?*’ She thought still trying to clear her mind of sleep. “Goddess, what time is it?”

0313

Heading down the stairs, the voices grew louder. ‘*Who’s stupid enough to bother us at 3 in the morning?*’ She thought. Looking around she continued until she found her parents huddled together at the front door. ‘*And not get invited in? I guess it’s not a Guild issues than.*’

She caught Tommy looking anxious in the kitchen doorway. Her mother looking close to vivid.

“Do you understand what time it is?” She whispered harshly. A clear warning someone was losing their job later.

“Yes ma’am, but...”

“Mom, dad?” Aeliana stepped up closer to try to peek outside. “What’s going on?”

“Oh sweetheart,” her mother immediately dropped her anger, “did the

door bell wake you.” (mother looks like she’d been up for hours, which was extremely unlikely as her father still had bed hair)

Aeliana looked past her parents to two young looking Keepers. “Yes, I was just getting some water.” She answered turning to her father she continued, “Dad, what are Keepers doing here? It’s three in the morning.”

“Well, Stargazer. That’s what we’re trying to figure out.” He replied to her before turning to the two young Keepers standing outside their door. “Now, young men, why did you think it was a good idea to ring the bell at this hour?” Her father asked reasonable. It was unfortunate for the Keepers that there was no right answer to that questions.

“Sir.” The one on the left turned to her father, “As we were trying to say, we have a warrant to search warehouse registered as a class RL, license 57G...”

“Yes, one of the reserve warehouses.” Her mother interrupted. “Child, that is a Guild warehouse and doesn’t answer the question my husband asked you.”

“Ah, well.” He swallowed heavily, the other sweating thickly. “You see justice sleeps for no one.” He continued weakly.

‘Goddess, how long has he been holding that one in?’ Aeliana thought as the pieces were starting to fall into place. This had nothing to do directly with her parents, but with Haruto. Aeliana sighed, this wasn’t going to end well.

“A warrant?” Her father asked calmly, but Aeliana recognized the warn-

ing in his voice.

“Yes sir,” the partner spoke for the first time as he handed it over.

“So, if you could have some of your men let us in that would be great.”

The first one continued a little bit stronger.

Her mother read the warrant over her father’s shoulder. “You can’t be serious.” She questioned.

“Yes ma’am,” the second Keeper added cautiously. “The Sakrá’s signature is at the bottom. It’s legal.”

“It’s a blanket search order,” her father continued his voice growing softer.

The first Keeper straightened as he answered. “Yes sir. We have the power to search all properties related to Cadet Hēidòng Haruto as part of the investigation into the hacking of the Commander’s Halo and subsequent generator failures.” He answered in one breath. “All very serious crimes.”

He added.

“And in violation of civilian ethics laws.” Her father continued his voice having gone cold.

“Uh,” the first one hesitated. “The Sakrá...”

“Did not approve a search of *Guild* property,” her father interrupted. “In fact, why don’t I just call and asking him now.”

Horror crossed both Keepers faces as her father tapped his BISM, “Wha? No that’s all...”

“Yes, Hwasan. Yes I know what time it is. Two young men, Keepers

with unit,” her father paused.

“F7, dear,” her mother answer.

“F7 are outside our door. Yes. Because justice waits for no one.” Her father paused as the Keepers grew paler by the second. “No get him on the call too. I’d like to ask Yonaka why his Keepers are bothering my family - waking my daughter, my *heir* - in the middle of the night.”

Aeliana looked at her mother’s smug smile as she patted her father on the shoulder before turning to go, “Let’s go back inside sweetheart. You’re father can handle this.”

Aeliana followed her mother further inside the house shaking her head at the ruined careers of those two Keepers. ‘*Some how I don’t think they’ll live the ire of the Sakrá and High Commander of the Keepers.*’

“Yes Yonaka at my home,” was the last thing she heard her father say before she was too far away. Her mother sitting them down in the sitting room, probably to wait for her father to finish talking to the High Commander and the Sakrá.

“A Stargazer Special for you, young Mistress,” Tommy announced as he set down her hot chocolate, “And lemongrass tea for you, my beautiful Mistress.”

“Oh Tommy,” her mother replied with a smile taking a sip of her tea, “you are such a flirt. What will we every do with you?”

“Perhaps a new kitchen, or new legs attachments. I saw a nice model in the monthly catalog?” He asked. Her mother smiling in a way that

suggested he was probably going to get everything he asked for right now. “Why don’t I get the paperwork in order for the Guild lawyers to look over at a more reasonable time?”

Her mother nodded prompting Tommy to wheel away, “Thank you Tommy.” Her mother called after him, “He is such a dear. We’ll have to get him something nice after all this is over.”

Aeliana took a sip of her own drink, ‘*Um, perfect as always.*’ She thought.

“I still can’t believe any Keeper would ring at the middle of the night,” Aeliana.

“And I’m sure it will never happen again.” Her mother replied as calmly as if they were talking about galactic weather. Aeliana agreed.

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Aeliana blinked her eyes open. Pulling herself into the here and now. Birds chirped in the background. The low murmur of her classmates joining the sounds of animals. Even from here, she could hear the sounds of the Park's cycling river.

"Your move, Cadet Helian." The voice of Cadet Haibeau brought her to the game at hand.

Her eyes scanned the 3D board of their Komi game. Her pieces unfortunately surrounded after a series of increasingly bad moves. Now, she was running out of options to salvage this game. "A moment more, please." She spoke aloud.

'If I can even salvage this game.' She continued to scan the board, reviewing option after option. And the best strategy she could come up with was losing with a slightly smaller margin. She held back a grimace. "White to level 3, G7."

Her white stone appeared in the region linking the group of stones, which in the end wouldn't change the course of the game. And as she was losing, birds chirped in the background. Nightmares and early morning visitors

combined, seemed to be the start of a very odd day.

“Awe, we see your strategy.” Cadet Haibeu replied as he took a handful of seconds to review the play. “But the end will not change. Why do you ask? Because despite your skill in the wonder strategic game of Komi, you have been playing absentmindedly.” He continued. “Black to level 2, J9.”

The move was expected even if she could have done without the commentary even if it was true. As such, she attempted to focus. There was still several points on the board before this game became pointless. “White to level 1, A3.” She countered.

“Commendable. We did not see that option.” He buzzed. “We find that it is good that you have returned to the game. We find no pleasure in winning when you were thoughts were with space.”

‘Oh, just shut up and move.’ Aeliana thought as she ignored her growing headache. Honestly, if it wouldn’t hurt her pride, she’d have just resigned now. She wasn’t going to win anyway. Looking away, her eyes found the majority of her classmates clumped together in groups talking. It was rare of them to have class away from KANP, but completely unheard of to have it mostly unsupervised.

Why they didn’t just call off all the classes instead of the first and second years class was beyond her. But here she was in Sanctuary Park, the sixth years on the other side of the river probably doing the exact same thing as them. Both Sergeants Yú and Sang-eo in an out all day. She wasn’t even sure what they were doing, playing round after round of Komi, could really

be called a learning experience.

'I can't believe I'm even thinking this, but I would rather be home, sleeping.' She thought as she eyes found a new four legged animal she'd never seen before. It leaned down to eat the synthetic grass, unaware or unafraid of the many intruders on its land. It was surprisingly beautiful in its simplicity.

"Cadet Helian." Cadet Haibeu voice snapped her out of her thoughts.
"We have moved some time ago."

"Oh, sorry." Looking back at the board, Cadet Haibeu had indeed made a new move strengthening his motion in the left quadrant. The move left Aeliana with only one real options to gain points. "White to level 4, C4."

"We pass this round." Cadet Haibeu replied.

Aeliana let out a sigh, "I pass as well."

A moment later, and their scores were automatically calculated. Although Aeliana didn't need a computer to tell her the outcome. '*413 to 587*'

Winner black, 587 to white 413.

"We would say good game, but that seems pointless. Why do you ask? Because for the majority of the bout you, Cadet Helian, were otherwise occupied with outside thoughts, for which we cannot speculate. As such, your game of play suffered." Cadet Haibeu replied as he moved to stand.
"We find this most unsatisfying, but understand outside pressures can effect otherwise ordinary life. As such, we offer our support in whatever ills you."

“Ah, thanks. But I’ll be fine.” Aeliana answered as she stretched out of their seated position.

Cadet Haibeu nodded before heading over to the only other game still going. Looking around, she could guess it was Kur-ram’s game still going, which was odd, because even she had a hard time making a game of Komi last with him. *‘At least on my good days.’* She thought pausing in her steps. While her parents probably wouldn’t have cared that she’d lost to Cadet Haibeu for the first time. She did.

Komi was one of the only family games where her parents never seemed to mention the Guild, or anything else. A game she’d been playing since she could reach her father’s knee. And when she was on top of her game, she could challenge Kur-ram on even footing. Of course, even then their games were often still short. What was the point of continuing for hours when they both knew the other would make no mistakes. And while their boards would be bare, they always knew who had won within the first twenty moves.

In fact, the only person who could take this long was Haruto, who frustratingly continued his games while passed the point of no return. *‘And yet, sometimes, some how, he manages to turn the tables.’* She thought, a small shake to her head. Even so, she doubted the Cadet playing against Kur-ram was Haruto. Continuing forward she walked into the growing crowd, although careful to avoid Cadet Haibeu.

While they were a good Cadet and probably sincere in their support,

Cadet Haibeu could and often did use five sentences when a couple of words would have sufficed. ‘*That and I’d like to keep my own problems to myself, and not share them with a whole Clan.*’ She thought as she pushed her way to the front knowing most were just standing around to look busy for when the Sergeants returned.

Making her to the front, Aeliana is surprised to find none other than the Kōtaishi playing against Kur-ram. ‘*Well, that explains the crowd at least.*’ She thought.

“You’d think they’d never seen a game of Komi before,” came the soft whisper of Ilia directly into Aeliana’s ear as if nothing between them had changed. Aeliana hummed in agreement, even as her eyes fluttered close, her mouth suddenly dry.

A deep breath later and she has control again of her ability to speak. Tilting her head to the right to eye Ilia standing next to her a small smile on her lips. “It’s a close game. I’d love to review the game play.”

“I’m sure you would.” Ilia replied amusement in her voice. “If there’s one thing Kur-ram complains about,” Ilia tilts her head in Aeliana’s direction as she rolls her eyes, “as if he’s not complaining about something *all* of the time.” She continued drawing a sharp laugh from Aeliana unwillingly.

Aeliana turns it into a cough, covering her mouth as she turned back to the game in front of her.

“He complains about how he doesn’t get to play against you nearly as much as if that’s my fault.” Ilia continued.

“Isn’t it?” Aeliana replied her eyes focused on the Kur-ram’s game. From the board, she could tell it was already over. The Kōtaishi might be gifted, but she wasn’t winning this round.

“Aeli, please.” Ilia pleaded. “Surly we can talk, if nothing else.”

“I...” Aeliana looked away from Ilia not sure when she’d turned to face her in the first place. “I think this game is over.”

“I resign.” The Kōtaishi replied a moment later. Causing a round of clapping to break out. Aeliana turned away from the game, pushing her way back to her table.

“Great,” Sergeant Yú’s voice rang clear. “It looks like I’m back just in time.” He looked at his BISM as he continued to speak, “Why don’t we do two more rounds? Then the best of the best can go against the sixth years.” Without waiting for a response, he pressed his BISM. “Your next partners should be assigned to you.”

Buzz.

Black, game board 6.

‘Why am I not surprised, I haven’t moved?’ Aeliana thought as she turned to focus on her re-setting game board. Sergeant Yú was somewhat predictable. For the students with the most influence, her, Akihiko, even Kenta, he bent himself over backwards to accommodate them. She should be grateful for the change, but the treatment left a bad taste in her mouth. Sergeant Sang-eo didn’t have that problem. Unfortunately for her, the other Sergeant seemed to be absent even more so than Sergeant Yú.

“May I join you?” The soft, steady voice of the Kōtaishi broke into her thoughts. Aeliana jumped out of her seat in surprise.

“Yes, yes. Of course, please.” Aeliana replied as she motioned for the Kōtaishi to sit.

They played the opening in silence before Aeliana could contain her curiosity no longer. “I’ve got to ask, and I don’t mean any disrespect or anything, but,” Aeliana paused in search of the correct phrasing and was mildly surprised that the Kōtaishi didn’t interrupt her. “I understand why we’re,” she pointed to her classmates, “are here. The Sakrá redirected power away from KANP temporarily while they fix the generator problem.”

Kōtaishi nodded, “White to level 2, D3.”

“But why are you here?” Realizing how that could sound Aeliana quickly amended, “I mean, how does Haruto’s prank effect your tutelage?” Turning to the board she continued, “Black to level 2, P16.”

“Alleged. White to level 3, O15.” She replied. Aeliana looked on with confusion. “Cadet Hēidòng’s involvement is alleged.” She continued nodding to the board.

“Oh, yes ‘alleged’. Black to level 3, Q15.” Aeliana replied. *‘Although how you believe that is beyond me.’* She added to herself.

“As for your question, my tutors specialize in critical systems effected by the incident.” The Kōtaishi responded.

Aeliana waited a moment longer, but the Kōtaishi neither added to her comment or made a move. *‘Well, now I know why their game took forever.’*

She thought privately. Still she found the answer weird. Two or three of her tutors, sure, but *all* of them busy helping with Haruto's 'alleged' mess. That just seemed unlikely. Even so, she didn't know the Gento heir well enough to question her about it.

Searching for something to break up the silence that wouldn't also possibly be offensive, she said the first thing that popped up in her mind, "Who was your birthday? Tsuyomi didn't have a chance to stop by after the event."

"The party was as expected." The Kōtaishi responded. "Black to level 4, R14."

"Ah, great." Aeliana replied shortly. "White to level 2, P13."

"Cadet Haruto's gift was very thoughtful." The Kōtaishi continued. "May I assume your progress with relic technology has increased satisfactory?" She added. "Black to level 5, P16."

"Yeah. Satisfactory." She looked at the board as the Kōtaishi's words caught up to her. "Wait, Haruto got you a birthday gift and it was appropriate? Thoughtful?"

"Is that surprising?" The Kōtaishi questioned her voice flat as if asking about galactic weather patterns.

'*Honestly, kinda.*' She thought thinking of the number of Akihiko heads with remarkable likeness. While thoughtful, she'd hardly call them appropriate. "Well, Haruto *is* full of surprises. White to level 5, R4." Shaking her head she added, "You should see some of the things he's gotten me."

Bang!

“Cough, cough, cough.” Aeliana waved away the smoke as she sat back leaning away from the mess before her.

‘*That makes thirteen.*’ She thought as Charlie wheeled into the room.

“Another one Mistress Aeliana?” He asked as he began to clean up the ruined chips before she could even begin to move.

“Unfortunately,” Aeliana replied. As she watched her work be dumped into a recycling bin. “I was sure having three in parallel would help.” She muttered to herself as she pulled out her nearby tablet to review her calculations. All estimates based on heuristic modeling. The amount of power needed to run even the tiniest maneuvering program for her relics was simply staggering. “Honestly, I’m not sure how AIM tech does it.” She continued aloud.

“Perhaps Young Haruto can assist.” Charlie replied her work bench looking nearly brand new after his cleaning. His head swiveled around as if just the words would summon Haruto. And normally, the would. Haruto seemed to have a second sense for when he was wanted.

“Yeah, that was my idea. Only,” looking up she spread her hands, helpless to the situation. Haruto was the only person she knew with an AIM that wasn’t produced by a Clan. If there was anyone who could help her develop a guidance chip that could run a relic system, it was him.

“Oh dear, is the Young Master still begin detained?” Charlie questioned real concern on his synthetic features.

“Probably,” she sighed as she turned away from the autobot. Thinking of Haruto wasn’t going to improve her day. Pushing her tablet away from her, she stretched in her seat. *‘Although the lawyers will probably have a field day with this.’* She thought.

“Isn’t it past the 48 hour hold?” Charlie questioned. Aeliana nodded in response. “Isn’t that illegal?” He looked into space for a moment before answering his own question. “Yes, it’s against rule 37.”

“That’s civilian law, Charlie.” Aeliana replied as she stood. “Besides, if they over step, mother and father will have him out of there.” She continued turning to face the worried autobot. “So don’t worry so much. He’ll be alright.”

‘Not like he isn’t used it this anyway.’ She thought to herself, but thought better of sharing it with the autobot. Charlie was still new, and seemed to have a soft spot for Haruto. *‘Along with my mother. The two of them could start a Haruto worrying group the way they go on about how much he’s eating.’*

“Well, if your sure.” Charlie replied although his face was still stuck in

a worrying expression.

Aeliana nodded as she spoke, “And since I can’t get anything more done, I’m going to go shoot something.”

“Oh yes,” Charlie replied as he wheeled back to give her space to move. “Do tell me how firing of your blaster goes. I’m learning new cleaning techniques for the weapons and want to know which work best.” He continued.

“No problem, Charlie.” Aeliana replied. Erik had already told her about the new protocols he’d given the autobot. She’d been expecting something from Charlie any day now.

Standing in front of the firing range, she unlocked her blaster. ‘*What am I doing wrong?*’ She thought as readied the weapon. ‘*Is it the guidance chips?*’ She questioned herself. “Open range.” She called out.

In one smooth motion, the range appeared from the custom made enclosures in the wall. A gift from Erik. Her current target, Akihiko’s head - a gift from Haruto, whirled around the range in a randomized pattern. Even so, her BISM program tracked the floating head easily.

Pew, pew. A second head entered the range. *Pew, pew, pew.* ‘*Erik can’t get me anything better than the guidance chips.*’ She thought letting her mind think as she shoot holes into Akihiko’s heads.

Pew, pew.

It was just unfortunate that Haruto had found SB3-QB9 in a trash heap. Luck like that didn’t happen to a person twice.

Pew, pew, pew.

“Additional targets please.” Aeliana called out causing two more heads to enter the field.

Calculating...

Aeliana waited the extra second it took for her BISM to track the movements before she started shooting.

Pew, pew, pew, pew.

One shot, each on the mark. ‘*What am I going to do?*’

Before she could fire again, red lights flashed in front of her. **Warning, visitors approaching.**

“Visitors?” She questioned aloud as she took a step back from the range. ‘*We don’t get visitors.*’ “Charlie?”

“Yes, Mistress?” He called as he rolled to the edge of the firing range.

“It seems we’re expecting visitors.” She replied coolly. “Could you prepare the warehouse?”

“Of course, Mistress Aeliana.” He replied wheeling away a little faster than normal.

Turning back to her firing range she spoke, “Close range.”

In a matter of seconds, the firing range returned to normal. Turning to her side, her blaster chest appeared beside her. A set of programs probably designed by Erik. Either way, she had her blaster carefully stored away, while Charlie took care of any loose ends. Although she doubted there were many as she’d yet to see Haruto work with anything illegal.

‘*Well besides whatever he does on his console.*’ She thought as she

walked back to her own console, powered up to last weeks lecture notes.

As if on cue, she heard Charlie opening the door. “Good afternoon, Master Helian, guests.”

Aeliana turned her head at the greeting, “Dad?”

A moment later, her father came into view flanked by a team of Keepers. “Stargazer.” He replied warmly. Looking at her open console he continues. “I’m so sorry to interrupt your studying, but I promised Yonaka I’d let a small group of his Keepers have a look around the warehouse.” Her father looked at the group of five Keepers.

One stepped up, “Sorry to intrude, Cadet Helian.” A woman replied, Aeliana assumed she was the one in charge. “This will only take a moment.” The woman nodded to her fellow Keepers who spread out.

“Alright, tell me what I can do to help.” Aeliana replied as she stood.

The woman walked over to her, “First we’ll need Hēidòng’s security clearance.” She nodded to the Keepers walking to the warehouse security terminal.

Aeliana crossed her arms as she spoke, “Haruto doesn’t have security clearance.” She turned to her father feigning confusion. “Did mom tell them? Surely Haruto would have.”

Her father in turn looked over the woman in charge, “Yes, well we just needed to double-check. If that’s alright.”

Aeliana made her way to the security terminal. Opening it, she pulled up the access levels. “See, Haruto isn’t listed.”

“And this is the official...” the Keeper closest to her began, but was cut off by his boss.

“That’s fine.” She replied to Aeliana, “search the open space, and check against the schematics.”

Aeliana walked back to her father as she waited. She could hear Charlie’s voice muffled in the direction of the supply office. There’d be nothing in there. “You don’t happen to know when they’ll let Haruto go?” She asked her father.

“Technically, he’s not being held for questioning.” Her father replied. At her raised eyebrow he continued. “Young Haruto’s there because he’s getting something out of it. But the Gongsaeng’s are putting up a fuss about it. And your mother’s starting to complain.” He continued. “They’ll have to charge him, or let him go tonight.”

Aeliana nodded, ‘*Good, because he’s got a lot to answer for.*’

“I think your mother wants to have him over for dinner.” Her father continued.

Aeliana snorted, “So he can get arrested on the way there again.”

“Hey, that didn’t turn out that badly.” Her father countered. “But yes, I did mention it was probably not the best idea.”

Before Aeliana could reply, a Keeper called down to them. “Is this roof access new?”

Before Aeliana could say anything her father spoke, “It was added to the blueprints several months ago.”

“Of course,” Leader Keeper replied. “Which one of these is Cadet Hēidòng’s console.”

“We’ll want access to all of them, ma’am.” The Keeper closest to the console replied.

“Haruto used the middle one, but you won’t find anything on that.” Aeliana answered.

“We’ll be the judge of that.” The Keeper replied as he attempted to log on. “I thought you said Hēidòng had no security clearance?”

“He doesn’t.” Aeliana replied sure the only reason her father would have agreed to this search was because of that little fact.

“Then how come we can’t access it?”

“Because that one’s offline.” Aeliana answered easily.

“Offline?” He questioned, but a look at the back of the console proved her statement true. “Alright, could you log us into these other two.”

“No problem.”

Ten minutes later, and the Keepers were filing out of the room empty handed.

“Don’t study too hard, my little Stargazer.” Her father called out.

‘Yeah, like that could every happen.’

— 28 —

Serious problem with ship so forces Haruto to sit and review what they know

-this is not an easy task

they make a list, and after some thought she adds Akihiko's new AIM
(she should question him about it before hand)

-they must locate the signal...

Haruto takes a minute to argue with QB9, before telling her about his Ghost Hacker Network.

-they argue about this for a minute before Haruto get's her to listen to him

...he can't hack into the GH network because he's still under surveillance, but he could use her BISM to do it (and by he, he means QB9)

-They do this and find the location

103.14.6677

The coordinates from the message was taking her through the red light district. '*This has got to be the stupidest thing I've every done.*' She thought to herself. "Hey, doesn't it sound like a great idea to follow an anonymous message to the Lower Level?" She mocked softly to herself. But she was here now. In search of that power, uniqueness. '*My way out.*'

Aeliana startles as empty beer cans roll in front of her. Turning sharply she hears a groan followed shortly by a, well, probably a person push out from under a pile of garbage. Shaking in disgust, she moves quickly past the man? Woman? Not that the next street is any better.

She wasn't sure if it was the smell that put her off, or the fact that around every corner there seemed to be piles of trash. Some of them having people just piling around them. Why anyone would come to the Lower Levels was beyond her comprehension. More importantly, the piles of trash was just a waste of money. Instead of sleeping under it, these 'people' would benefit from just selling it to the nearest compostor.

'*That piles got alumina in it!*' She thought in outrage. Mentally calculating the number of units she could get for it. '*What are these people*

thinkin...’ Her thoughts were interrupted as she accidentally bumped into someone.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Aeliana responded politely.

“Well, what do we have here, boys?” Dirty man, attract attention to some kind of dice game. ‘*Gambling? It’s that illegal?*’ she half turned looking around, but saw no Keeper patrols nearby. In fact, she hadn’t seen a Keeper patrol in sometime.

“Yeah, what’s a pretty little think doing in the slums?” Another one asked.

“I must have made a wrong turn. Sorry, I’ll just be on my way.”

Rough laughter. Hard grip on her bicep. “Now, now. You just got here.” He looked at her with a glint in his eyes that was unsettling. “Wouldn’t do, to just let you go. People might think us a rough bunch, not showing you a little hospitality.”

She tried to pull her arm from his grasp, but he held firm, “No, that’s alright. I’ve really got other places to be.”

“No.” Gripped her arm tight enough that she felt a slight ting of pain before it was gone. “I think you’re in the right place.”

Assessing the situation, she was sure she could break this man’s grip. The problem lay with her unfamiliarity with the territory. Getting away was one thing, staying out of this disgusting man’s reach was another. ‘*I just need to locate a patrol.*’ She thought, but her eyes found nothing on a quick scan.

His grip tightened as he pulled her to him. She smelt his breath on her face, rancid as if he'd never heard of personal hygiene. Before he could say anything more, someone throw a metal box at them. Smelly man pulls back giving some much needed space. If he hadn't been probably be unconscious.

"Who did that?" He roared.

"I'd leave that one alone if I were you." A man from across the street motioned toward her. A small crowd of people passing by without a thought.

"Oh yeah? Or what? You gonna do somethin' about it." He moved to reveal a blaster, an illegal blaster. '*Oh Goddess, what have I gotten myself into?*'

The man across the street shrugged, "Nope, just given some friendly advice." He spit on the ground. "You're new on board, so you might not recognize danger when you see it."

The man holding her companions fanned out as if ready for battle. They held themselves in a way that told Aeliana they had blasters as well.

"That sounds more like a threat, and me and my boys don't do *threats*."

The man across the street didn't blink, "No, just a friendly warning." The man shook his head, "That girl in your hands is the Helian heir." The disgusting man tightened his hold in shock before releasing her. "Yeah, I figured you didn't want to get on the wrong side of the Guild. They're not really known for play nice."

The disgusting man frowned but started walking away. "Too skinny anyway." He muttered before calling back, "Come on boys, lets find us a

real beauty. Kanopos supposed to have some real lookers.”

Aeliana turned to thank the man across the street, but he was already gone. Shrugging she moved on. “Yup. This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

A short while later found Aeliana staring up at a derelict looking building. She glanced back at the coordinate again. No matter how she looked at it, this... building, was the correct place. ‘*Well maybe it looks better on the inside than the outside.*’ She thought before finally getting the courage to push through the door.

The lighting was bad, but at least the place smelt better than the streets, so she continued on. There was only one way down the corridor, and better lighting the further she went. She grew more confident with every step. Soon enough she was outside of a door with light pouring out from the crack. It opened instantly on her approach.

“Welcome Cadet Helian.” Man with white hair and glasses smiled over at her from an impressive looking console. Her family owned one similar that was only two models newer, or rather her mother did. Seeing as that model wasn’t even out for public purchase, Aeliana was very impressed with the man’s equipment.

‘*This place must be well funded.*’ Looking around she saw more of the same, high level tech confirming her thoughts.

“I see you approve.” He replied pushing his glasses further up his nose.

Nodding she spoke, “I was a bit worried, coming from the red light

district.” She answered honestly.

Soft chuckles greeted her statement. “Sorry, but rent anywhere else is impossible.” He answered. “Besides, we can’t all have the fortune of the great Helian clan.”

“We’re hardly a Clan. Mister?” Aeliana replied as she took a step further into the room. ‘*Is that a simulator?*’ Her eyes catching a piece of equipment, she’d been sure was only allowed in official KANP studios. She relaxed a little at the sight.

“Hermes please. I’m not much for formalities.” He replied as he held out his hand to be shaken. It was a gesture more common in the Kumo and Romulus Empires, but one she’d been trained to respond to nevertheless.

Offering her own hand without hesitation she replied. “Helian Aeliana, but you already seem to know that.”

Pushing his glasses up his nose again, he smiled kindly at her. “Yes. I take special interests in KANP students that would otherwise be overlooked. And you, Cadet Helian,”

“Aeliana please,” She interrupted.

Nodding he continued. “Aeliana then.” Turning to his main console he continued, “You are by far the most overlooked and deserving of attention from my organization than ever there was a student.” Picking up a tablet he added, “Your test scores rival that of the Zhùróng prodigy, and heir Katsurō. And your battle simulations are stimulating if nothing else.”

“Thank you.” She replied hesitantly. She’d never heard of a KANP

organization that focused on students like her. And if she were honest with herself, she was a little concerned that he seemed to have her full record list from KANP. Affiliated or not, those records were supposed to be classified.

“No, really it is a tragedy the backward nature of KANP these days. It wasn’t always like that, but...” He shrugged as he put the tablet back down. “What can you do?”

She nodded, “Right. About that. You said in your message...” She trailed off, uncertain how she could phrase it without seeming power hungry. That wasn’t her. She was just... desperate.

“Power?” Hermes continued for her, a kind smile and gentle eyes seeming to not judge her for coming. “I’d hope you were here for that. We, my organization and I, specialize in developing unique technology for optimizing the integration of the biological to the mechanical.” Fixing his glasses he pierced her with a look, “In other words, more powerful, more skilled, more daft use of ZenKZ-D.”

Aeliana took a sharp intake in breath. This could be her answer to everything.

“And, Cadet Helian. We want you as our next Pilot. We want to see you in OCI with the rest of the Clan heirs. But more importantly, we want to utilize your natural born skill so that you outshine even the Kōtaishi.” He let a long pause settle between them before coughing into his hand. “That is, if you still want that. Becoming a Pilot, I mean.”

“Yes, of course. I just...” Aeliana could see her future. A Pilot at

last, but something nagged at the back of her mind. Her mother's voice. '*Everything comes with a price.*' She thought as she was finally able to remember the saying. "What do you want in return?"

"Return?" Hermes parroted her question in what Aeliana knew was a stalling technique. "Is not the betterment of Kanopos enough?" Aeliana gave him a hard disbelieving look, which only caused him to laugh. "You are right. Astute as your files suggests. There is always something. Isn't there?" He replied around a smile.

Instead of answering her, however, he turned to a locked anti-chamber. Pulling on specialized gloves, he carefully extracted a chip of some kind. Turning towards her, he held it out for her to see. From Aeliana's untrained eye it looked to be some kind of guidance chip. Too dissimilar to the older AIM chips she'd read about in her studies, but also nothing like anything she'd seen. And the material? She was hard placed to label it, but it looked organic almost, and the strangest green she'd ever seen. Sickly almost in color.

"This is the latest AIM, we've developed, and unfortunately, the survival rate is low."

"AIM's don't have a survival rate."

"This one does." Moving to put it back, he turned around fixing his glasses in the process. "As I'm sure you were able to tell, the material is something my organization has developed, and is organic in nature. As such, there has been some rejection of the chip."

"So, if I want this, extremely amazing, life changing power," Aeliana began sarcastically, "All I've got to do is gamble on my life." '*What a price!*'

Hermes nodded, "As you say, there is always a price. But I've been increasing research into reasons for rejection and don't truly believe it will be an issue in your case. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered to offer." Fixes his glasses, "You are, after all, the heir of a great empire."

"I'd hardly call the Guild an empire." Aeliana replied tensely.

"But others might, and do." Hermes continued. "If this were to go wrong, my organization would not survive the fall out with the Guild." Shaking his head, "No, that is why I have gone through great lengths to double and triple check your possible compatibility. And the results are high."

"How high?" She needed to know all the fact before she agreed to anything.

"80% success rate." Hermes answered easier. "That's the highest success rate we've every had. So, the real question, I think is how badly do you want this? Being a Pilot?"

Aeliana knew the answer immediately, knew it in her heart. But this felt off, *wrong*. She was missing something. "Organization." She said softly as her mind produced the missing piece. "You keep saying organization. You don't work for KANP, do you."

"Alas, no. I am part of a privately funded organization that specializes

in training novice Pilots like yourself." Hermes replied. "Although all the equipment you see here is legally obtained."

She nodded at the non-answer. '*Private organization. Private funding.*' No name in that reply. A warning sign her mother had told her look out for, but did she really have a choice? What other way was she going to make it into OCI? Did she really have the option to decline this offer? She needed more time. Turning to him she smiled as if this were all a part of the Game. Pulling together all of the skills her mother taught her she answered diplomatically. "This is a lot to take in all at once. I'll need some time to decide. That won't be a problem will it?"

"Of course not." Hermes answered easily. Smile just as kind and gentle as when she'd first walked into the room. "Why don't you take the rest of the week to decide? And if not, that's okay. We have other novice pilots who want this with a passion."

"Thank you, again." Aeliana replied as she made her way out of the building.

"I really do hope to work with you, Aeliana." Hermes replied as he waved her way.

Aeliana couldn't honestly say the same back, so she gave one more tight smile before retracing her steps back. '*Do I have a choice?*' was her first thought. The next was just as difficult to answer. '*How much of myself am I willing to sell to become a Pilot?*' The answer evaded her.

From the moment Hermes opened his mouth, she'd known she couldn't

trust him. The facts about her life, KANP, his 'organization'. All left a sour taste in her mouth. She wasn't stupid. There was always more underneath the surface, behind the mask. She could recognize the Game just as easily as she could calculate shipping revenue. In her sleep. And honestly, that had never been in question.

'Can I sale my loyalty to an unknown organization? And for what? Power?' The thought brought her up short. She wasn't a power hungry fool. Her parents raised her better than that. How often did her father take advantage of those seeking power like this? Her mother? Even now, she could hear her father's condemnation of those who didn't care who they stepped on to get what they wanted. Those who would betray you just as soon as it proved advantageous to them.

No that wasn't her, and yet... "Do I even have a choice?" She questioned aloud. She knew what her father would say. '*There's always a choice, Stargazer.*' But Goddess knew how badly she wanted to be a Pilot. And right now, she didn't see any other way. This just might be her only option.

'Am I willing to sell my soul for this?' She thought. '*Play around with an organic AIM?*' For she knew, there'd be no going back. Not from this, not from something that had a mind of its own.

'Do I have a choice?' Before she could answer the question, she was roughly pulled into a back alleyway. The smell of decay abruptly reminding her that she was in the Lower Level, and that perhaps getting lost in her thoughts here was the best idea.

"Look, you must be new here, but I'm a Helian. Why don't we all just go our separate ways?" She replied as she turned to go. She didn't have time for this. Unfortunately, her exit was blocked by two very large men.

"Ha ha haa," a woman's voice chuckled lightly behind her. "Do you heard this boys?" She spoke causing Aeliana to turn back around to the clear leader of the group. "You must think you're something else, don't you?" She continued a hard gleam in her eyes.

"Look," Aeliana continued more cautiously. "I don't think either of us wants any trouble. So why don't we just walk away?"

"Well aren't you," the woman paused a tight press of her lips giving the lie to her next words, "*sweet*." She nodded her head at her companions. "Take her," she commanded causing her men to grab each of Aeliana's arms. Aeliana struggled for a moment, but the oversized men over powered her quickly.

'Just great, Helian. How are you going to get out of this one?' She thought as the woman before her circled her slowly. A predatory glint to her eyes. Pausing in front of her, the woman leaned into her, Aeliana met her head on.

"Now, I wonder," she whispered in her ear as her hand caressed Aeliana's face. Aeliana tried to jerk away, but the woman pulls her face towards her. "I wonder, how much mommy and daddy will pay to get you little snot nosed brat back." Aeliana tightened her jaw as she pulled out of the woman's grasp.

“A lot actually,” responded a voice Aeliana recognized from behind them. The woman looked up in surprise at the intruder, but it was already too late. The men holding Aeliana slop down in a heap. Unconscious or dead, she didn’t know and didn’t care.

The woman backpedaled in fright. “Look, I...”

But the intruder cut her off. “Not that you’re going to find out.” Erik stepped out of the shadows. His blaster aimed at Aeliana’s would-be capturer. He fired in the next second causing the woman to slump over limply. ‘*Goddess, I hope that was set to stun.*’ She thought as she stepped over the down bodies by her feet to move to Erik. Her concern ending with the thought.

“Do I even want to know, why you’re down here?” Erik eyed her pointedly his blaster nowhere to be seen. Aeliana looked away in guilt, but Erik must of took it another way. “If this is about that Amur kid...”

“Not everything is about *Ilia*, Erik!” She snapped. Looking up at him sharply. At a time like this, she didn’t even want to hear Ilia’s name. The last thing she needed was Ilia’s voice in her head too. Her parents were disapproving enough.

“Hey, hey,” Erik replied hands up in defeat. “What a guy to think? You being down here ’n all?” He looked around to emphasize his point. “If you didn’t notice, ain’t too many options in the Red Light district.” He continued suggestively.

Aeliana hurried ahead in an attempt to get her blush under control, but

Erik's longer strides had him next to her in seconds. "You're not my minder anymore Erik." She replied tensely. "You don't need to be here."

Erik pulled out a bag of dried fruit from somewhere in his overalls. Popping one in his mouth, he spoke between bites. "You think I want to be here?" He swallowed before continuing, "at least not on the clock, anyway." He raised his eyebrows suggestively as he smiled wide.

"Try not to get your food everywhere." Aeliana replied sarcastically as she continued at her brisk pace, even though she knew she'd never lose Erik.

His smile never wavering. "Hey, what happened to not be a kid anymore, huh?" Popping a couple of dried fruits in his mouth he continued, "Ya tired of 'hat already?"

Aeliana walked a little faster.

"Anyway, I'm over at the docks, when I get message sayin' yous in the Lower Level." He took another large bite of his food. "And not 'n the clean part, well," shrugged as he corrected himself, "*cleaner*, part of it."

"Can we not?" Aeliana asked, but Erik continued as if she'd not said anything.

"And without Tommy or me. So of course, I've gotta make sure everything's on the up and up." He popped another handful of his snacks into his mouth as he looked her over. Searching eyes that caused her to look away. Judgment she could have taken, but worry... "Ya know, if yous wanted somethin' down here. A good time, or whatevers yous kids get up to these days for broken hearts and such, all yous had ta do was ask."

"I'll remember that for next time." Aeliana replied sharply. She just wanted this conversation to be over.

"Hey now, I just want to help." Erik replied.

"Well, I don't need it! Not now, not back there." She jerked her head as she replied. Knowing her anger was misplaced, but unable to do anything about it.

Erik shrugged unfazed. "Yeah, yous probably right." He popped another fruit in his mouth. "Yous no kid anymore. Touch as Zoranium metal, yous is." He smiled down at her with pride. "And I wasn't so worried back there. The Guild's support on the rise down here. What with all those new jobs. Those idiots weren't gonna get too far. Not in Kanopos or anywhere 'n the Empire." He added just as proudly.

But the smug look bugged her. Here, in this cesspool of Kanopos, she was something. Her name meant *something*. But in Solas? '*I'm a nobody.*' The thought caused her to start laughing uncontrollable forcing them to stop in the middle of the street.

"Man, whatever yous on, I want some." Erik added next to her. "Did ja get the good stuff off of K?"

For whatever reason that caused her to laugh harder. Bent over, tears sprang at the corners of her eyes. Erik patted her back awkwardly. After a moment her laughing fit passed, and they started to walk together. Aeliana giving up on trying to loss him. "Hey Erik."

"Yeah."

“Thanks.” She smiled sadly back at him.

“Don’t mention it.” Erik replied. “No really, don’t. If ya folks find out about this one.” He shivered at the thought. “The old man would have my *head*.”

“You saved me. That’s hardly a bad thing.” Aeliana replied.

“Shouldn’t ah had to.” He bumped his shoulder gently into hers. “I’m supposed protect ya remember. Make sure ya don’t need save’n.”

Aeliana looked away. Her mind back to internal struggle, the reason she’d been down in this dump. Was she willing to sale her future for an impossible dream? To owe another a debt she would eventually be called to pay for? The answer eluded her, so she tried for another. “Why do we try so hard?” She questioned aloud.

“Huh?” Erik asked as he popped another handful of dried fruits in his mouth.

“I mean, what’s the point. Of fighting for the impossible. Of trying to be something we’re not.” She elaborated.

Erik looked at her for moment, weighing something in his head before replying, “For fun I guess.”

Aeliana didn’t try to hide her frown. Rolling her eyes, she turned away from him. *‘I’m a fool for thinking Erik could be serious for a second.’* She thought bitterly.

“No hear me out.” Erik continued around a mouthful of food. “Ya remember that time the old man took us to Sevian Nine?” Not seeing

where this was going, she nodded all the same. “The old man wanted us all ta take the Sevian track. Big, popular, safe. He’d gone on it a dozen times already. Just couldn’t wait ta take us.”

Aeliana remembered. She’d been twelve and her father had decided to use one of her vacation days for a family outing, a day trip to nearby Sevian Nine - the ultimate theme park. They’d been stuck for days near the system from what was supposed to be a routine re-fueling, but had ended up as a major repair stop. In those days, Erik spent more time off ship than on it. A change that had only happened after she’d joined KANP. As such, the few fun days they spent together always stuck with her. “Yeah, he’d set his heart on it. But Ilia had talked about the advanced track for ages since her parents let her go the year before, and I just had to give it a try.”

Erik nodded as he popped another unrecognizable dried piece of fruit into his mouth. “Yeah, and we had a blast, did we.” She nodded in agreement. While she didn’t see a connection, it was still a pleasant memory. “See, it would’a been easy ta go on the Sevian track. And we’da probably have a blast on it too. But you’da been disappointed.” He nodded to himself as they made it to the outskirts of Solas. “I fig’ya it’s ‘cause ya had ta try so hard ta convince da old man ta let us go. ‘cause when ya try hard, it means a little bit more when ya succeed. It’s like ya win twice, ya know.”

Aeliana nodded hesitantly still not completely sold on the idea. “And what if you fail? What then?” She asked.

Erik shrugged. “Then I guess ya try harder next time, huh?” He looked

around them as he continued to speak. “Anything worth anything is going ta be real hard ta get, ya know. That’s why it’s fun. The easy stuff just ain’t worth it in my book.”

Erik’s BISM buzzed. He pushed his bag of food in his pocket. “Look I gotta go. Stay outta trouble, kiddo.”

Aeliana waved goodbye, “Bye Erik.”

“Oh, oh. This never happened. Yeah?” He added walking backwards.

“Never happened.” She replied easily. Meaning more than he could possible know. Hermes was offering her an easy path that just didn’t *feel* right. An option for someone truly desperate.

With nothing pressing, Aeliana found herself walking aimlessly through Solas. Her thoughts running in circles questioning her own decision. Without Hermes’s offer, she was back to square one, no plan of action that would change her future. Even so, she couldn’t find it in her to regret her decision. There was desperation and then there was foolishness. And both were trouble.

‘How desperate am I to have even, for a moment, considered putting some unknown possibly sentient material into my body?’ She thought. That answer was perhaps the real problem. All she knew was that she never wanted to feel that desperate again. *‘I can’t let my happiness be dependent on OCI. I have other options.’* She continued. She was, after all, the heir to the Guild.

So what if the thought of leading an intergalactic company didn’t set

her heart racing in the same way piloting a ZenKZ did? It was honest work, well mostly honest. More importantly, it was her family's life work sense the chase into space. Her history, the Guild's legacy, rivaled the Gento Clan's. If that was to be her lot in life, then she'd make it work. Because even now the thought of being someones head Tech was unpalatable.

Nodding to herself, she looked up, taking in her surrounds. She snorted in disbelief at the building facing her. '*The library, huh?*' A small smile broke out on her face. She couldn't even be surprised her body had taken her here. And what better place to be?

Walking into the building with her head held high, she knew she would not, could not, surrender to her fate just yet. For now, she had one goal; getting into OCI. And if she failed, it wouldn't be because she didn't put her all into it.

Her will renewed, Aeliana walked to the back of the building away from the foot traffic and to the individual consoles. Her home away from home. Nodding to familiar faces, she was brought to a halt in front of *her* console. Red hair that could only belong to one person in all of Kanopos sat staring at her screen, typing away.

<Should have Haruto get the Kotaishi involved with this.> Seway into next section. Aeliana suggests they get the Kotaishi involved. "The what now?" Haruto.

"The Kōtaishi!" Aeliana upset. Buzz from her BISM.

QB9 - The Princess, idiot.

“Oh, yeah. I’ll message Yakei now.”

“Yakei?” Aeliana questioned softly, but Haruto was already in another world.

Part IV

The Gento Heir

— 30 —

This is a Chapter frome Yakei point of view...

<they use a Haruto prank to get the Keepers there the next day, but
already gone>

— 31 —

This chapter should center around the Guild...

I want to know more about it, and tie in that this is her back up...

Here, there should be a mention of Haruto trying to get the new location of the shadow organization... They are being, much more careful, but Haruto is sure they'll mess up somewhere...

— 32 —

...end of a session, Aeliana watching, Watai takes her aside... should get lots of banter between the main people in AI head department.

-Lieutenant Commander Qíshàn doesn't like her, should be some hostility

Watai gives Aeliana a TARGET, boss lady wants her to replace (some guy) on Targeting. (Now you're officially a tech - Watai)

Aeliana takes it with her... Boss lady asks about it (mentoring here)

...Aeliana gets to the warehouse and puts it on...

...power was great, wished she could have it...

...or at least have Haruto here so he could copy it and they could make another... she looks over at his console, but doesn't dare go anywhere on it...

...some mention of QB here...

...end with her using it more...

— 33 —

“Initiating prototype A9Q-ZZ.” Lieutenant Commander Qíshàn tenor voice called out.

Aeliana console showing her the dummy ZenKZ in the largest anti-gravity chamber she’d ever laid eyes on. The largest anti-gravity chamber on KTS Kanopos. Numbers running across her screen as the ZenKZ came alive, pilotless.

“Systems online.” Lieutenant Watai’s lighter voice followed as she typed furiously at her console, “Connecting to guidance system.”

The visual unit within the ZenKZ light up on her screen, as she reviewed her own contribution. ‘*Everything’s looking good so far. Nothing I would change at least.*’ Aeliana thought as she connected to the ZenKZ dummy guidance system along with the seven other Technicians on the power terminal. Here, she had important role to play.

98..99..100

“Command connected.” Qíshàn continued. “All support systems quality control running.”

A new bar entered her screen as the firing system, targeting system,

neural guidance, and so much more came online. Each being micro-tested in real time before the theoretical launch. It was amazing to watch and far more complicated than she could have every imagined. Her own console only covered the targeting systems. The patch she'd worked into its core code the actual reason for this testing.

'Now, lets just hope I haven't screwed anything up.' She thought as she ran her diagnostic protocols on the targeting systems. Another Tech would be running diagnostics on firing, and another on the interconnections. Only the Head Technician would monitor all systems function. Something, at this moment, she couldn't imagine doing herself.

All systems functioning. Her diagnostic came back clean, so she connected to the ZenKZ network. "Targeting coming online and on standby." She spoke aloud.

"Good job Targeting." High Commander Chinō replied, "Firing, don't tell me a KANP student can go faster than you."

"Firing at 92%, ma'am." Lieutenant Kim called out as his head was bowed over his console.

"Good." The High Commander sat at the Head Technician's console eyes monitoring the system.

Aeliana looked away. When she'd agreed to shadow a Head Technician after Sergeant Sang-eo had strong-armed her into it, she had not been expecting to be under the leadership of arguable the most important Head Technician on Kanopos, High Commander Chinō. As the Head of the De-

partment of Artificial Intelligence, she was one of the three leaders of the DOMAINE.

'I don't know what kind of pull Sergeant Sang-eo has, but it must be pretty impressive.' She thought. She would also have to thank the Sergeant for the experience. While she'd been more than skeptical about using her two week vacation to shadow a Techie, Head Technician or not, she'd not been able to argue against the experience.

Every year she did a project to gain the 300 points of extra credit. A fact that Ilia used to tease her about every time. Used too, anyway. After last year, Aeliana hadn't even realized that had been something she could miss. So much so, that she'd contemplated not doing it this year. She didn't need it and she'd been struggling to come up with something interesting to do. Enter Sergeant Sang-eo.

When the Sergeant had confronted her about learning more about Techies as her extra credit project, she'd been in no position to turn him down for a number of reasons, so she still wouldn't admit to herself. *'That and I barely know anything about the profession.'* She added mentally. Her embarrassment over the fact just as fresh as when the Sergeant had quizzed her on the topic. She'd not soon forget not being about to give the acronym for the DOMAINE. Something now, she'd not soon forget. But that had more to do with what the Department of Mechanical, Artificial Intelligence, and Neurological Engineering stood for to her now. What the High Commander Chinō had made it about.

Of course, she'd never planned on needing to know anything about the DOMAINE and the Tech world. But she could hardly imagine telling the Sergeant that. *'Actually, I going to take up the family business if I this OCI stuff doesn't work out.'* She thought mockingly in her head. Suppressing a shake of her head, she could already imagine how that would go down with the Sergeant. His disappointment easy to conjure up.

"Firing online and on standby." Kim called out.

"Interconnection, tell me you're not far behind." High Commander Chinō questioned.

"Linking now, ma'am," Qíshàn answered.

"Neural guidance online. Waiting on standby, ma'am." Watai replied.

"Propulsion on standby, ready at you're command."

"Fusion core stabilized."

"Visuals online, dummy linked and on key monitor."

The tenor voices sounding off one right after another too fast for Aeliana to track as new to the AI team as she was. Her eyes stayed on her console, sure that they'd be ready for testing soon.

"Do we have audio?" The High Commander demanded.

"Audio coming online now ma'am," the Techie in charge of visual replied, Lieutenant Gǎnjué if Aeliana was remembering his name properly. "Pairing with visual now."

"Gyro systems running, ma'am," Lieutenant Suyeom added. Aeliana's eyes falling on the breaded man she was pretty sure held some familiar

relationship to the Sakhalin Clan given his size and heavily breaded face.

“Interconnection, mechanical online,” Qíshàn continued, “Pairing with guidance systems.” Another second and the Lieutenant Commander looked up, “All systems ready, ma’am.”

The High Commander turned to the larger Halo screen of the ZenKZ dummy in the anti-gravity chamber. “Pull up targets so we can get this thing started.”

“Yes ma’am!” Aeliana coursed with the rest of the group.

As if on cue, a single round target appeared in her viewing screen. ‘*Okay, this can work.*’ She thought.

“All stations on standby, taking control of prototype A9Q-ZZ.” The High Commander replied, her console transforming before Aeliana’s eyes. Each time she watched, she was just as fascinated. Controls she was familiar with during her own KANP Pilot simulations appeared on the Head Tech’s console. Minus the helmet and body armor, and Aeliana could have mistaken the High Commander as a Pilot.

Her attention was pulled to the Halo screen as the dummy ZenKZ started do move. Limbs moving in the well taught systems diagnostic test Aeliana had, herself, performed countless times now. Only the High Commander finished in a blink of an eye. Moving at a speed, Aeliana could only hope to achieve in the future.

“Firing protocol begin.” The High Commander called out as she released her weapon, a single wielding machine.

Just as soon as the High Commander shoot the stationary target, two more popped up. Without waiting, she continued, taking both out with two shoots. Aeliana looked at her screen, ‘*Dead center. Yes!*’ She thought. As two became four and four became eight. Aeliana was impressed at the Commander’s speed. ‘*But how will she handle, 64?*’ She thought as the final targets appeared in the field.

Dropping the ZenKZ level blaster, the High Commander continued, “Command overwrite. Activating ballistics system.”

“Heard Command.” Kim replied. “One of four ballistics ready for launch.”

“Launching.” High Commander Chinō continued, and the ZenKZ transformed again. Aeliana leaned into the screen, never having seen this before. The chest of the ZenKZ opened to reveal a missile launching system. A millisecond later and the rocketed all at once causing the stationary targets to be destroyed in a flurry of explosions. ‘*Almost like fireworks.*’ Aeliana thought as the screen slowly cleared.

“Report.” The High Commander commanded.

Aeliana looked over the targets, her mind taking in the data. “100% accuracy, all targets destroyed.” Aeliana called out as she looked up in wonder.

The someone near her snorted, “The Gods be praised, huh?”

Qíshàn voice was unmistakable when he added, “Impossible, 100% Cadet, you sure?”

Aeliana turned to the Lieutenant Commander, “All shots fired hit bulls-eye. That is unless the targets reporting if off.”

He sneered at her, “How dare y...”

“Enough.” The High Commander replied, “I don’t have time for you to bicker, moving on to phase two.”

“Roger!” The group coursed.

Qíshàn turned back to his console, “Adjusting randomized programming.” His hands typing furiously, “Readyng targets, High Commander. Any second now.”

“Good,” the High Commander replied as she stream leased from the ballistic unit as it closed. She pulled the blaster back out.

Without warning, a target popped out from behind the High Commander shooting off at a velocity significantly faster than Aeliana had every calculated. ‘*Star dust!*’ She cursed mentally as she pulled up the targeting program. With the Commander’s skill, the first target was destroyed in seconds, quickly followed by the two after it moving in randomized directions and at speeds Aeliana had not accounted for. By the time, she had the targeting results up, the Commander was already destroying the next four.

99.8% accuracy target 1; 97.5%, 93.2% accuracy targets 2, 3...

Her analysis reported.

‘*Why didn’t I account for asteroid speeds?*’ She thought. ‘*Oh, that’s right. No ZenKZ can move that fast.*’ She knew that Qíshàn was just

getting back at her, but she would not be provide wrong. Typing furiously, Aeliana adjusted her targeting algorithm.

“Command overwrite. Engaging ballistics.” The High Commander spoke as she moved, but Aeliana didn’t look up. At the current velocity, accuracy was bound to fall to 80% plus or minus 2.6%.

“Two of four ballistics ready for launch.” Kim called out.

But more importantly, she was sure Qíshàn would use the results to not enact her patch. ‘*Well, I won’t let you win.*’ She thought as explosions sounded in the background. ‘*There, updated. Now, do I have time for a simulation?*’ She thought as she looked up. But the smoke had cleared.

“Targeting report.” The High Commander demanded a little breathless.

Aeliana’s eyes reviewed the data, “Average accuracy dropped to 82.1%, High Commander. 93.7% of targets destroyed.”

A snorted replied, “Figures it couldn’t handle moving targets.”

“82% accuracy is still very good,” Watai replied as she looked over at Aeliana with a smile.

“Yes,” the High Commander replied as her ballistics cooled down. “With a few adjustments, it will be battle ready.”

“High Commander Chinō?” Aeliana called out hesitantly.

“Cadet Helian?”

“I believe I’ve made the necessary adjustments.” Aeliana replied.

“Impossible.” Qíshàn interrupted.

"If you'd let me, I'd like to run it again." Aeliana continued stronger this time.

"High Commander, she's just wasting our time." Qíshàn replied. Aeliana looked around and all of the other Techies had skeptical looks on their faces. "No one, can adjust on the fly that quickly. At least not a KANP student ma'am." He continued. "We've humored her enough."

"Lieutenant Commander Qíshàn, do you make the decision here?" the High Commander asked.

"Wha? No ma'am." He replied stiffly, "I would never dream of commanding you."

"Than, I'd like to run the targeting protocol again." The High Commander replied. "Cadet Helian, upload your adjustments. Let's see how close we can get to 100% accuracy."

"Yes ma'am!" Aeliana called out as she turned back to her console. Qíshàn leaned back in his chair, frown on his face, but she ignored him. "Uploading now."

"Re-initiating." Qíshàn replied in a flat tone. "All systems ready. Targets coming online, momentarily."

"Command ready." The High Commander responded her blaster at the ready. "Let's make this good."

Just as before, the targets at impossible ZenKZ speeds. One, than two, than four destroyed in a matter of seconds. But Aeliana was more concerned with the results. '*Come on, come on. What is it?*' She thought

as her screen finally spat out the results.

**100% accuracy target 1; 100%, 100% accuracy targets 2, 3;
99.9%, 100%, 100%, 99.8% accuracy targets 4, 5, 6, 7...**

‘Yes!’ She thought as the results flowed on her screen. ‘*Take that Qíshàn.*’

“Command overwrite. Ballistics online.” The High Commander called.

“Firing responding, three of four ready for launch, ma’am.”

“Launching!” The High Commander responded. This time Aeliana’s eyes were on the screen as 64 moving targets danced around the High Commander some racing at her. Aeliana was surprised she could move while engaging the ballistics overwrite, but the High Commander dodged racing targets and a millisecond later missiles launched turning the screen into lights and sound.

Aeliana held her breath as the smoke cleared. “Tell me what we have, Cadet Helian.” The High Commander replied calmly.

Aeliana smiled as the results came in. Averaging them mentally as they flashed before her screen. “99.13% average accuracy, ma’am.” Looking up she smiled openly, “100% of targets destroyed.”

“Wow!” The majority of Techies cheered.

“Way to go, Cadet Helian,” Watai cheered her own with a large smile, while Qíshàn remained silent.

“Well, then I’m disengaging.” The High Commander replied as she began the process of shutting down the dummy ZenKZ. “Lieutenant Com-

mander Qíshàn, power us down.”

“Yes ma’am.” Qíshàn replied. Aeliana pushed slightly away from her station. The Lieutenant Commander was the only one needed for this part.

“Good job, Cadet Helian.” High Commander Chinō replied suddenly by her side. “I’d say, your little patch is battle ready.”

“Thank you High Commander. If not for your confidence in me...” Aeliana replied just as softly.

“None of that.” The High Commander replied. “A good leader always knows when to push the boundaries of their people. And I’m not sure, I’ve pushed you far enough yet.”

Aeliana smiled at the complement, but before she could respond slow clapping grabbed their attention. Turning to the testing room entry way, Aeliana was surprised to see the Kōtaishi. But it was the old Gento standing next to the Gento heir that seemed to have the High Commander’s attention.

“Impressive Woong. Your skill at the helm is always something to admire.” The old man spoke. “Testing a new targeting patch? Or will it be in the next model of your amazing m-TARGETS technology?” He continued.

“Gento Genshirō, an honor as always.” The High Commander responded with a small bow returned in kind. “And of course, we are honored to have the Kōtaishi in our presence.” She added causing the room to murmur in awe. “But I cannot take the credit for this new targeting patch.” She continued hand resting on Aeliana’s shoulder. “Cadet Helian Aeliana, one

of KANP's finest is with us for the transition season. And she has surprised all of us with her brilliance."

"You are too kind, High Commander Chinō." Aeliana replied softly.

"Helian?" Gento Genshirō rolled her name in his mind. "Yes, I'd heard the heir was at KANP." The old man pierced her with a look, but Aeliana held his gaze. "Well than perhaps, you have a bright future in the AI Department."

"I'm still hoping for OCI." Aeliana replied with a easy smile. A technique her mother had taught her disarmed older men.

The tilt of the older Gento was as much as she got in reply. High Commander Chinō interrupted the stare down with a question of her own, "Now, what brings you to this side of the ship, old friend?"

"The Honorable Yozora has asked that I teach the Kōtaishi the values of the Technicians." He turns to the Kōtaishi, "As such, what better place to start but the DOMAINE, the birth place of modern day ZenKZ-D technology."

'That's putting it lightly.' Aeliana thought in reply. As she was coming to learn so much about the DOMAINE and the Tech world. That had surprised her the most. How KANP got away without teaching just the basic history behind the AIM, Aeliana would point to hubris.

The High Commander gave a full laugh at the declaration. "If only others saw us in that way, huh. I'd love to stop fighting KANP for funding."

Genshirō nodded, "The Honorable Yozora makes it a priority in his

council dicussions. As I'm sure the Honorable Kōtaishi will when she takes her seat."

The Kōtaishi bowed at the statement. "It would be my honor for without the advancements of the DOMAIN, KTS Kanopos would not be the envy of the Five Great Empires." She responded.

Genshirō nodded as he watched the AI Command positioned Techies leaving the room. Aeliana wasn't sure if she should follow, but given that she'd have to push her away around the High Commander, the Kōtaishi, and the old Gento, she opted to stay put.

"Speaking of the great and powerful KTS Kanopos," the High Commander began. "Is it true that Guardian Kamaitachi will be the new Guardian Commander?"

"Yes, despite the Clans complaints." Genshirō replied stiffly. "But the man is qualified despite his family. And it's long past time that Guardian Inugami decommission."

High Commander Chinō nodded, "Too long in the mask is never good for the psyche."

"Yes, and the OCI cadets will learn much from him." Genshirō added pausing with a distant look. "It seems Neurological Department is ready for us. It's a pity Octavia is busy with the annual Cram session. The Kōtaishi could have learned much from her insight."

"I'm sure there will be another opportunity for High Commander Stone to provide her insights." The High Commander commented. "Please don't

hesitate to call if I can be of assistance.”

Genshirō nodded, “Come Kōtaishi there is much left for you to learn today.”

The Kōtaishi nodded at the man before turning to Aeliana, “Goodbye Cadet Helian.”

“Ah, bye. Cadet Gento?” Aeliana replied weakly with a small wave of her hand as the two left.

The High Commander raised an eyebrow when they were alone, “You didn’t tell me you knew the Kōtaishi.”

‘*Know her?*’ Aeliana thought to herself as her eyes found the door. ‘*Haruto maybe, but me?*’ “I wouldn’t quite say know.” Aeliana replied after a moment in thought. “We’ve talked a few times that’s all.”

“Still more than most.” The High Commander replied with a sigh, “I suppose you both run in the same circle, huh?” She added.

Aeliana shrugged a yes in a way her mother would have winched at. “Somewhat I guess.”

High Commander Chino’s eyes lite up in amusement at her response, a small smile at the edge of her lips. “Anyway, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the future.” She held her hand out to stop Aeliana from responding, “And yes, I know your first goal is OCI. What young KANP student doesn’t want to be a Pilot?” She asked rhetorically. “Honestly, after just a week with you, I’d say us DOMAINE folks won’t have a chance to recruit someone of your caliber. But yours is an odd birth year.”

“So everyone keeps saying,” Aeliana answered bitterly.

“The Clans used to stagger births mostly to keep top marks, but that got lost a two generations ago. An accident or not, your situation is the result.” High Commander Chinō replied sympathetically. “Which is why I want you to keep that TARGET in your arm.”

“What?” Aeliana questioned as her hand hovered over her BISM. “But, I thought this was just for the remainder of my shadowing program? So I could connect to the system.”

“And so that’s what I told you.” High Commander Chinō responded. “But there is no shadowing program, Aeliana. Sang-eo called in a favor I couldn’t ignore, and I’m glad I didn’t try too.” High Commander Chinō held Aeliana’s gaze. “I’d never intended for you to do anything, but each day your surpassed my expectations. And now that I’ve only got a few more days with you, I know you were meant to use one of our multi-Thread Adaptive Recognition, Global Emulator & Tracking System.”

Aeliana didn’t know what to say. “High Commander...” She began not sure how to tell her that she had no intention of becoming a Tech, begin stuck behind the desk.

“Yeah, I know. Pilot dreams.” The High Commander replied. “The thing is KANP isn’t what it used to be. Politics what it is.” The High Commander shook her head. “Whether you end up at the DOMAINE or not, doesn’t matter when it comes to this.” The High Commander tapped her own BISM as she spoke, “And I’m sure you’ve already figured out your

little guidance chip can't do even half the stuff the Clan's AIMs can."

Aeliana nodded. Having struggled with that realization over the past few months. Banking on Haruto to be able to find, steal, or help create an AIM of her own. '*A long shot at the best.*' She thought as she absentmindedly cradled her BISM against her chest.

"So keep it." High Commander Chinō continued. Winking at her she turned to leave, "Besides, the DOMAINE could benefit from the first ever Pilot to use a TARGET instead of an AIM."

"Thank you, High Commander." Aeliana called out as the AI Department Head paused at the door.

"Make us Techies proud, kid." She responded before exiting the room.

Aeliana found herself slumping back into her chair. She'd never imagined keeping the TARGET, but now she had in her possession the answer to her most pressing problem. The very first non-Clan ZenKZ-D interface system. The model that all AIMs were generated from. '*A TARGET of my own.*' She thought.

Now only time would tell if her TARGET could keep up with the widely used AIM.

— 34 —

<This should be a chapter from Yakei point of view... Not sure what it will be yet...> <There should also be lead up to the Jade Festival... Haruto had promised something memorable...>

This is an empty filler chapter... Need something between this and the Jade Festival...

Some lead up, maybe she should break up with her girl friend here. Actually, that's a pretty good idea... This would give us a reason for her to be on her own for the Jade Festival...

<I want to show the real struggle she's having. Thinking about the Shadow organization. KTS Kanopos. OCI, just everything, and Ilia says something frillious. Also jealousy, because Haruto sees her more than she does.>

Aeliana's knee was knocked gently as Ilia leaned into her. Her friend's face alight as she dove into her current experiments with hybrid flowers. Aeliana could feel a second hand enjoyment simply from the contact high. Taking a bite of her lunch, she smiled in response, nodding along to a conversation she was only partly following.

These moments, growing smaller with every passing day, were what she lived for. Just sitting next to her best friend as they enjoyed the delights of one of their favorite street vendors off Solas Plaza. The two of them alone in a world of their own. No Clans, no KANP, no OCI, no Guild, or disapproving parents. Here, the only thing that mattered was the good food and the better company. '*We'll get to do this for two more years at least.*' Aeliana thought.

With KANP six times a week, and Ilia always busy in the evening with 'Clan stuff', their time together was rapidly becoming non-existent. She ought to put in more effort. Try to make this, them, work. But... '*I can't give up on becoming a pilot. Not yet, I just can't.*' she thought wistfully. And yeah the odds were bad, and when she thought to hard on them they seemed impossible, but she couldn't give up. That just wasn't who she was. It didn't matter what Ilia said, how reasonable her arguments were. Ilia just didn't seem to get it, get *her*. Aeliana held back a snort at the irony. The one thing Ilia seemed to not get about her, and it was probably the most important.

Aeliana held back a sigh as she nodded at the right times to Ilia's story. Only half listening. Ilia could talk for days about flowers. Their growth, breeding, arrangement, what have you. And if she were a civilian, Aeliana honestly doubted either one of them would be in KANP right now. Things would be different. *So, different. But maybe too different.* The thought caught her by surprise, but it felt right as she studied her friend.

Her eyes tracing the curve of her face. The round of her small nose. The pink of her lips. The light in her blue eyes. A civilian Ilia would probably be someone she'd never recognize. Something she could hardly imagine. '*In that universe, would we have ever even met?*' She questioned herself before violently pushing it a side. It was a thought she hoped never crossed her mind again. Complete unthinkable even with the tension in their relationship. Ilia was so much more than a chance encounter, meant so much more to her.

'If I can become a pilot, we'll go to OCI together and none of this will have mattered.' That thought she welcomed as it took her to a place of possibilities. A place where they trained together. Fought together. A place where they were together. '*At least, for a little while.*' She thought wistfully. They'd be bound for different battle ships, she was sure of it. And Ilia did make a good point, if she wasn't a pilot, Aeliana could be her head technician. What was three years of OCI, compared to the span of a pilot's active duty? A lifetime together?

But no matter how she pitched it to herself, she just couldn't wrap her mind around a life as a technician. '*How can I? When every time I close my eyes I see her, the Moon Princess.*' She thought, images of that beautiful ZenKZ-D flashing before her eyes. She wanted the suit, the power, the control. *She* wanted to be the Pilot. Not the women behind the machine.

Unfortunately, OCI was little more of dream at this point. A Kanopos Pilot had to have something she didn't have, unique creativity. Perhaps

that was why only the Clans seemed to become them. Stabbing viciously at a dumpling, Aeliana couldn't help to think of the in justice of it all. The Clans were literally born into a unique ability. Without it, they had just as much imagination and creativity as she did, if not less! In fact, the only one in their class who seemed to have the so called unique creativity required to be a Kanopos Pilot was none other than Héidòng. And that thought alone was enough to make her want to strangle someone.

"And you're not listening to me, are you?"

Aeliana snapped her head up, guilt clouding her features.

Ilia laughed softly, "No, it's okay. I bore myself sometimes too. Honestly, I'm just glad to know you don't want to skewer *me*." Ilia pointed to the dumpling in question causing Aeliana to blush in embarrassment, which just caused Ilia to look even more amused.

Fighting down her blush, Aeliana turned to face her friend, "By the Goddess, Ilia I'm so sorry. You know I love to hear your talk about your work."

"But..." Ilia lifted an elegant eyebrow in question.

"But my head was somewhere else." Aeliana admitted reluctantly.

"So, buttercup," Ilia began. Aeliana gave her a warning glance, but Ilia looked unfazed. 'Buttercup' was just another in a long list of pet names Ilia seemed to have for her. "What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?" She continued.

Sighing she, shifted her eyes away in guilt. There was only one rule

when they ate lunch together. Lunch was lunch. No Clan stuff, no KANP stuff, no mention of the Guild, or really anything that could start another argument. And this clearly broke that rule. “Hēidòng.” Aeliana replied impulsively. Ilia’s face a blank mask, stony in its silence. Not wishing to be misunderstood, she continued. “Well, really KANP in general. And the future and I don’t know.” Aeliana paused as she struggled to articulate her thoughts.

“I mean, Hēidòng is gifted with this amazing creativity, and he just seems to like, throw it in everyone’s face.” She added. *’My face in particular.’* She continued in her head. “Like today. What kind of question was that? Does he live in the crawl space or something?”

Ilia seemed to relax at that despite Aeliana’s response despite the broken lunch rule. Aeliana chose not to think about why. “I don’t know, Aeli,” she replied thoughtfully, pausing to give the question serious consideration. “I mean the only reason I know about her is because she’s the heir to her clan. And I only know that because of clan lessons.” Ilia tapped her chopsticks against her chin in thought. “You know, I think she’s the only clan heir I’ve never met.”

“Really?” Aeliana questioned in disbelief. As heir to her clan, Aeliana always thought Ilia had met everyone. But Ilia’s nod was sincere. “But you must at least know her given name?”

Ilia shook her head as she replied, “It’s always been Kōtaishi. No one’s ever called her anything else. I mean, even her dad calls her that. At least

that's what Kur-ram says."

Aeliana nodded in understanding. Now that she was really thinking about it, she didn't even think she'd be able to recognize the Gento heiress if she saw her up close. And how could she? When she'd only ever seen her from a far during the Moon Festival parade. There performing the elegant dance to summon the Moon Princess's true strength. If only for that reason, Aeliana was starting to see how Hēidòng might confuse her for royalty.

"I guess I kinda like Moon Princess, when you think about it." Aeliana spoke aloud.

Ilia paused in thought, "Yeah, I guess I could see that. Princess and all. It is the name of her future ZenKZ, so why not her too?" Ilia ate a dumpling before continuing, "She's lofty enough for the title anyway. Although that's not saying much given her Clan."

They entered a comfortable silence as they finished their meal. Aeliana's mind drifting to the future as uncertain as it was. Ilia reached over to pay the automat for their lunch. This week it was Ilia's turn to pay. Next week it would be Aeliana's. Although, sometimes she just made them lunch if she was tired of the street vendors options. They couldn't go too far away from KANP given the short amount of time they had.

"Hey," Ilia called out grabbing Aeliana's attention, "I heard a new film is arriving this week. Want to go see it on our free day? We can make a day of it."

"I..." Aeliana wanted to say yes. They'd not had a night together in the

longest, but she knew she'd need her free day to study. Time was running out, and she still didn't have a unique ability to showcase for the OCI test. But most of all, when Ilia made that face, so hopeful, Aeliana found it hard to say no. "I can't." But she had to.

"Oh." Ilia replied her face a mask. Ilia's Game face was one of the only expressions of Ilia's that Aeliana had trouble deciphering.

"I have to help my parents. They're planning another big expedition." Aeliana continued. It was true. She did have to help her parents. It just wasn't going to take all day. But this was better than telling Ilia the truth and getting into a huge argument about OCI. Again. She just couldn't. Not right now. She didn't trust her emotions.

Ilia gave a forced smile as they got up to leave, "I get it. No worries. Maybe next week."

"Maybe." Aeliana returned the strained smile knowing in her heart that until she had something, *anything*, unique to showcase. There would be no next week. Looking at Ilia now, she didn't think she'd fooled her either. Ilia had always seemed to be able to see through even Aeliana's best Game face. She wasn't even sure why she still tried.

Kur-ram and Kenta found their way to Ilia's side as they always seemed to do after lunch was over. Aeliana was just glad they never crashed it. She liked them both well enough. She just didn't need the constant reminder of clan privilege. And only Akihiko seemed to surpass the three of them when they were together for using their clan privilege. She had to deal with that

in class, she didn't need to deal with it outside of it.

"You excited for tonight." Kenta asked Ilia as he ate another handful of chips. Aeliana tried not to frown at him. He was a sweet kid, won't hurt a butterfly. But he was also the only cadet in class who was allowed to eat. Health condition.

Eyeing the new look to his SKIM she was incline to believe him that he needed a high caloric intake. Well and Ilia had explained it once to her. A requirement for his family AIM or something. That was all well and good, but the bags of chips he was constantly consuming wouldn't produce more than a tenth of his caloric intake. Assuming he did nothing but eat chips all day; he'd still never break even. She'd done the math when Ilia had first told her.

'No, its those pills you've been popping that keep your calories up.' Aeliana thought as they continued to talk around her. Ilia had mentioned her evening plans in passing a couple of weeks ago. The three clans, Sakhalin, Krai, and Amur were rotating their positions within their flotilla. Despite how much Ilia had complained about it, it was a pretty big deal as far as their Clan traditions went, tracing its roots from well before KTS Kanopos' founding.

(Either remove, or expand) *For this rotation, it was the Amur clan's turn to lead.*

They made it to KANP soon enough, cutting off the rest of their clan talk, which was a relief. As if the Gods were against her; however, Kur-ram

gave a loud groan of displeasure.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Kenta replied as he opened another bag of chips. "This is going to be so boring."

"If we're lucky Akihiko might have already told his daddy all about how bored he is." Ilia continued.

Kur-ram shook his head, "Masaru's in a meeting with the Sakrá."

"Damn, guess we'll just have to sit through another boring lecture." Ilia replied.

Aeliana speed up at the classroom door in the guise of getting to her seat. She didn't look back. Her little world from earlier was deconstructed just as it always seemed to. Much too fast. Far too completely. She just needed to get through the rest of class, and the couple of hours she'd spend in the library afterwards. That always seemed to calm her unnatural rage against the Clans. Tomorrow would be another day. But today, she'd reached her limit. As she took her seat, she found Ilia looking back at her, an unreadable expression on her face.

But that wasn't quite right. Aeliana knew that look and that was the problem. Not able to stand her gaze, Aeliana looked down at her tablet. Reviewing old lecture notes as the rest of the class settled in.

Soon enough the Sergeant was behind his desk ready to start class back up. Moving to a new window, Aeliana was surprised the lecture feed wasn't in her inbox yet. It never took this long for the Sergeant to send them their lectures. Looking up, she found the Sergeant padding himself down

in search of the thumbdrive housing his lecture notes. '*That's strange,*' she thought. '*The Sergeant's normally better prepared than this.*'

Of course, if the Sergeant would just send them all of the lectures for the day, or even week, before class he wouldn't be looking completely unprepared now. Waiting impatiently, Aeliana tried to avoid looking at Ilia, who kept glancing back at her every few seconds. '*Come on, Sergeant. Get the class going before Ilia starts sending notes I'm going to want to throttle her for.*'

The Sergeant's face twisted in confusion as he gave his SKIM another once over. '*You've already looked there.*' She thought frustration bubbling to the surface. Honestly, his insistence of live-streaming his lectures were beyond paranoia. Hēidòng wasn't going to hack into them. '*As if he'd put that much effort into his studies.*' Aeliana thought darkly. "Goddess forbid he do that." She whispered under her breath. And there was no one, but Hēidòng that could pull something like that off.

'Although, I wouldn't put it past Hēidòng to mess with the lecture just for the laughs.' She thought. In fact, now that she was thinking about it, live-streaming wasn't so bad, if the alternative was Hēidòng hacking into the lecture and replacing it with garbage. '*Yeah, I suppose I can live with live-streaming. Now if only the Sergeant would get it together.*'

Searching his desk, the Sergeant finally thought to look *inside* it. Pulling his thumbdrive out, he smiled as he plugged the little device into his BISM central control.

'Finally.' Aeliana thought as she looked down at her tablet expecting to see the new feed. Instead of the new message, however, her screen flickered before blink off. *'What?'* She thought as she looked back up to see the Sergeant hastily pulling his thumbdrive back out of his BISM.

"What the..." Someone said from behind her. Confirming that her tablet wasn't the only one acting funny. She started to raise her hand, but the Sergeant was frantically tapping on his BISM, completely oblivious to his surroundings.

"No, no, no, nonono, *NO!*" He chanted from the front right before the room locked down.

An audible click was followed by the flashers descending from the ceiling. Followed by the flashing red lights. The battle stations alert sounded in a high pitch noise. Lights flashing on the floor to the emergency window exits that had popped open.

She automatically stood up, *'Are we scheduled for a drill today...'*

"Code Red, Systems on lock-down. Kanopos Academy for Novice Pilots room 13 under...." The female automatic voice fell out as her BISM buzzed. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. Flashed in bright red blocks of letter before an artistic rendition of a black-hole replaced it.

Deep cold laughter replaced the automatic voice. Frozen in place, a chill ran through her spine. She felt a pinch of pain, she looked back down at her BISM but was met with a black screen. "Oh no..." She spoke quietly as the laughter continued to fill the room. *'A virus.'*

Her SKIM flickered in color a sign of the virus interacting with her guidance chip. Looking down at herself, she saw her SKIM had turned into a weird pattern of green and pink. Her neighbors were no better. Looking around, everyone had a bewildered expression on their face as seemingly random colors appeared on the malfunctioning SKIMs.

A flash went off, and Aeliana moved her hand to shield her eyes on instinct.

“How troublesome.” Kur-ram’s voice sounded from the front.

Looking up, she saw what had caught his eye. The Sergeant followed their gaze as a picture of the class was brought up on the blackboard. Aeliana sighed at the image, *‘Only Hēidòng would give them a giant f-u.’* Now the colors made sense. The whole class was a hand gesture that would get her grounded for a week if she every did it in front of her parents. For which she’d learned from experience.

“What is the meaning of...” The Sergeant began, but the sound of the rest of the building going into Red alert stopped him. More dark laughter echoed from outside of their classroom replacing the automatic voice.

Shutting her eyes tightly against the reality of the situation, she couldn’t help her thoughts. *‘He’s gotten all of KANP.’*

“No.” The Sergeant replied softly as he looked around. “The Gods above, this can’t be happening.” His fingers jabbing his BISM again, but it was probably hopeless. At least for a little while anyway, Hēidòng was unfortunately very good at hacking. And his pranks often lasted for hours,

if not days.

“Hēidòng *HARUTO!*!” The Sergeant yelled as he leaped through a nearby window. Maybe he’d actually seen the blond lingering after a well done prank, but he was probably just trying to get out of here.

“He’s definitely getting fired after this.” Seo-Jun replied as he hopped down, toward the windows and their only way to exit the building. “On the plus side, we’re getting out of this joint early.”

“Small wanders.” Akihiko replied sarcastically, but his SKIM seemed to already be going back to normal.

Tightening her fist, she felt the pain of her nails biting into her skin acutely. Her eyes found the six clan members in her class. All of their SKIMs seemed to be slowly turning back to normal. *’No, they won’t be affected by this much longer, unlike us regular folks.’* She thought bitterly. She’d have to make a trip to a Keeper Tower to get her BISM guidance chip reset, which would erase all of her notes from this week as she only backed up her data on her free day.

Anger boiled within her. *’I could rip Hēidòng in two for this stunt.’* She didn’t care if he had no ambition, *she* was going to be a *Pilot*. She needed this class. Needed the information that the Sergeant was going to provide, because the Clans were *always* on the test. Information which was tightly regulated by the Clans themselves. What she knew, she’d learned from class. She wasn’t like Akihiko, or Seo-Jun, or Kur-ram, or even Ilia. That information wasn’t just handed to her.

"Hey," Ilia's voice spoke softly from her right startling her from her thoughts. "Since class is canceled, do you want to go to the movies now? It won't be the new film, but I'm sure we can find something to watch."

Taking a deep breath she centered herself. "Do I want to go to the movies? *Now*?" Her tone should have warned Ilia off. Would have warned anyone else to back off, but Ilia continued unaware of the danger.

"Yeah, I mean after we get our AIMs checked out." She replied.

Aeliana barked a sharp laugh fueled with disbelief in response.

"You mean *your* AIM. Goddess." She spoke sharply. "Have you forgotten already that this little civilian only has a *guidance* chip?" Aeliana's voice rose in response causing some of the remaining students to look in their direction. "Of did that just slip your mind too?"

"Ah, come on Aeli. You know what I mean." Ilia replied softly as if she were talking to a wounded dragon.

"Do I?" Aeliana felt hysterical laughter pour out from her. "Do I know what you mean? Or is it that *you* just don't get it. You never seem to get it."

"Aeliana, maybe we should take this..."

"Somewhere else?" Aeliana pointed around at the faces staring at them as her voice continued to rise. "Am I embarrassing you, Ilia? The Clanless Cadet not good enough for you, now?"

"This has nothing to do with your Clan status and you know it." Snort. "Goddess knows you're not some helpless civilian, some nobody. Or does

the Helian name mean nothing these days?" Ilia countered. Aeliana left like she'd been slapped by the sharpness of her friend's tone. "Look, I know you're upset, and I thought you might like to yell at me some place a little more private. That's all." Ilia continued gently. "Maybe not have it out at me in front of our KANP class?" Ilia looked at her teasingly, which seemed to have the opposite effect. Her tone patronizing.

"Not everything can be solved with a wink and a smile." Aeliana replied sharply.

"Look, I know what this is about. Why don't we..."

But Aeliana cut her off, "Go somewhere else? Why so you can nod and smile at me without listening?"

"What do you except me to do?" Ilia asked arms crossed as she continued. "It's always the same argument. OCI this, OCI that. I need to study more, Ilia." Her voice mimicking Aeliana's as she ranted. "What am I supposed to say to that?" Ilia didn't want for an answer. "Aeli, you're already smarter than half the class combined. Studying for one more hour isn't going to change that. And the Goddess knows if things were just a little different." Ilia cut herself off there. "But they aren't so, why don't we stop this constant arguing and just enjoy the time we have left together. Have fun for once."

Aeliana lips tightened in response. "I didn't come to here to have fun, Ilia, to play games. Not yours, or anyone's head Tech, but a *Pilot*." Aeliana can see Ilia's retort before the words leave her mouth and she pushes on

and over her friend. “And I don’t care how happy your parents were like that. *We* are not your parents and never will be.”

“Aeliana...” Ilia looked as if Aeliana had stabbed her. Hurt clouding her eyes.

“By the Goddess, Ilia, I came here, to KANP, to become a *Pilot*.”

“That would be illogical. Why you ask...” An automated voice sounded from beside them.

“Who dragged you out of a *black-hole*? ” Aeliana snapped, interrupted the boy. Her ire transferred to the intruder. “Who even are you?”

The cadet adjust his blacked-out goggles. “We are Haibeu, and have been in your class for the past four years.” His voice remained the same with only a hint of irritation.

Closing her eyes in frustration, she tried not to look around the classroom. Ilia, of course, had been right earlier. Having this argument in the middle of class was going to bite her later. Or now, as it seemed her classmate decided to add his own thoughts to their fight.

“While we cannot comment on your relationship with Cadet Amur, we believe we should clarify essential facts center to your argument. Why you ask? Because we believe that all conversations, no matter the volume, should have access to all factors for a more meaningful and productive discussion.” Cadet Haibeu said within a single breath.

“And those would be?” Aeliana asked with a warning tone. If he didn’t get to the point soon, she wasn’t sure what she’d do, but feared it would

involve violence. And violence against the clan was a serious offense.

“The factor pertaining to your desire to become a Pilot. We have conducted hundreds of thousands of scenarios with regards the to OCI cadets admission. And have come to one singular conclusion in all of them. All seven spots are filled by the Clans.” Cadet Haibeu replied. “There is approximately 0.000136% chance of you obtaining an eighth slot.” Cadet Haibeu adjusted his goggles. “Given Cadet Hēidòng’s familiar background and apparent favoritism by the Sakrá, he has a significantly better chance of obtaining the eighth slot.”

Aeliana felt her face go blank with his input. *’As if this day just couldn’t get any worst.’* She thought darkly. But of course it could.

“See, this is what I’ve been trying to tell you.” Ilia spoke softly as if a gentle voice would change the words themselves. “You’re amazing, and super talented, and if not for politics and the year you were born into you’d have a spot no problem. But,” Ilia looked at her deeply. A sadness to her gaze as if it pained her to voice the truth. “But there’s no way that you become a Pilot. No matter how hard you push yourself. This is politics, Aeli. We can’t fight politics. Or change it. And I don’t, *can’t*, watch you break yourself over this impossible dream.” Ilia’s eyes spoke of a story of lose, an apology she wanted so desperately to convey. They begged her to understand. “Please, let’s just go to the movies. Have fun while we can.”

Aeliana expected to be livid in her anger. But all she felt was an emptiness, as if broken. The fight lost from her. Ilia’s hand touched her arm

gently, pulling her in. And for a moment, Aeliana allowed it.

“I’m so sorry, Aeli.” Ilia whispered in her ear.

“So am I.” Aeliana replied just as softly as she pushed herself away and out of Ilia’s arms. Ilia’s confused face mocking her.

“Aeliana?” Ilia questioned.

Aeliana felt a sense of clarity in herself as she looked into Ilia’s eyes. Clarity and distance. “I don’t think there can be an us anymore, Ilia. As friends, or...” She spoke as if someone else inhabited her body.

“Come on Aeli. You don’t mean that.” Ilia replied with a weak smile.

“Trust. Faith.” Aeliana continued. “Every relationship is built on that.” Ilia reached out, but Aeliana shied away. “If you can’t have faith in me with this.” Points around them. “Then I can’t. I just can’t keep pretending I’m okay with that.”

“I can be okay with this.” Ilia replied desperately. “Goddess, I’ll even help you study if that’s what it takes.”

But Aeliana was already stepping away from Ilia, physically and mentally. No words could change her decision. In the end, she knew no matter what Ilia said, there would be no change between their wants and desires. They’d be back here again sooner or later. That much Aeliana was sure of. “I can’t.” Aeliana replied as she turned her back on her one time friend.

“Aeliana, please.” Ilia begged, pain in her voice.

Aeliana didn’t dare look back. “Goodbye Ilia.” Stepping out of an exit window she pushed herself forward. They’d always been bound for different

circles.

Aeliana tugged on the fine fabric that made up her coveralls. While intellectually she knew the material was the best the Jade Empire could offer, the constant brush against her skin was aggravating. '*It's such a petty something so beautiful, felt so official.*' She thought as she looked down at the tightly woven coverall. Greens and whites, mixed in with hints of purples told a fine story of the origins of the Guild.

'*Well, the official part of it.*' It was a poorly kept secret that the Helian family, her family, wealth originated from less than savory places. After all, not all of the original Chasers were after Gods and Demons. Some, like hers, had been in it for the money. But the Helian piracy days were long over, now they celebrated only one Emperor instead of playing the field.

'*Well, at least on Kanopos.*' She thought with another tug to her coveralls. What her parents did outside of the Jade Empire was none of her concern.

Laughter bubbled passed her as children sprinted along the crowded streets pulling her out of her thoughts. Two young girls ran passed holding hands, and for a moment Aeliana was in another place, another time. Her

thoughts were again interrupted as a small boy bumped into her.

“Sorry.” He called back as he ran to catch up with his friends.

A long deep sigh escaped her as her eyes took in the Jade Festival around her. Effigies of the current Yù Huáng Shàngdì littered the streets. All of the Halo screens having the Emperor’s severe face staring down at the people. Beads of jade strung everywhere she looked. But of course, that had nothing on each of the twelve Clans offers. ‘*Not that I’ll get a close look this year.*’ She thought.

When the time was right, all of the Halo screens would turn to the big show as the Clans graciously displayed jade statues that would be delivered to the Emperor by the currently honored Keeper unit. A big show of power and money that would take hours with the presentation and the Keeper patrol, Yonaka would give a long speech before announcing the honored unit for this year. All of it boring. And as her mother liked to call it, ‘*A pissing contest.*’

And if that wasn’t bad enough. The week leading up to this ‘festival’ was party after party all seemingly hosted by the Guild. Really, all she wished was for a reason to miss it all like last year. But the ‘I just broke up with my best friend’ excuse only seemed to work for the one year.

‘*Is it really too much to ask for this to be over now?*’ She paused in thought looking up hoping the Goddess would be kind to her.

“Ha ha haa!” A group of laughing KANP students interrupted her prays.

"I guess so," she muttered under her breath. As she finally found a stall she didn't recognize.

'To think, the hardest part if finding something, anything, that doesn't remind me of Ilia.' She thought as she sat down at the booth. The waiter on duty seemed to recognize her immediately, or at least her Guild coveralls, as he rushed off to have a fierce conversation with his boss.

She slumped her head down just a little pretending to look over the menu, while in reality she was contemplating if her mother would notice her disappearing before the end of the Festival.

'Probably, Erik seems to have eyes everywhere.' She sighed as she turned her eyes to the menu proper.

"Hey, I thought that was you, Aeliana." A male voice she recognized and wished she didn't spoke from behind her.

Aeliana took a second longer to composer her Game face before turning to her fellow Cadet, "Akihiko, what a surprise seeing you hear."

'Oh, please me passing through. Goddess, please.' She thought, but her face remained open and friendly.

Instead, Akihiko sat down. Waving the waiter over. "You have excellent taste it seems. This is an Zhùróng stall. We've five more this year, thanks to father's tireless efforts." He replied chest out in pride. "I'm tasked with visiting them all." He continued as the waiter arrived.

"Honorable Akihiko, how may we serve you today?" The server asked with a short bow.

“Yes, we’ll have the special and a pot of Jade tea.” Akihiko ordered for them both causing Aeliana to push her menu aside. The fact that she’d actually been in the mood for noodles was just another blow to her overall day.

“Of course,” the waiter bowed again, “tea will be out right away.”

Akihiko dismissed him with a nod before turning his attention back to her. Clearly, all of the party practice her mother had been making her do recently was paying off, because Akihiko actually smiled back at her despite her worsening mood.

“Anyway, the Gods must be kind to me today, because this was my last one.” He added with a smile.

Aeliana smiled back, a little tighter than she probably should have. “Goddess be praised.”

He snorted at her comment, “And her too, sure. Honestly, these days my father has more time for me than you do.” Aeliana moved to apologize, but Akihiko waved it away. “No, don’t worry. I get it.” He clenched his fist bring Aeliana’s eyes to his BISM. For a moment, she thought it flashed green, but in another blink it was back to normal.

“Do you?” She questioned softly, just another rule of the Game. Zhùróng expected women to be meek, and Akihiko was no different.

He smiled again at her as he nodded. Eyes open, showing a vulnerability he shouldn’t have given their limited familiarity. “Yes. You’re going to give your all to getting into OCI, no matter how fruitless the effort might seem.”

He nodded in understanding, “I respect that.”

Tea arrived interrupting anything he might also have said.

“Thank you.” Aeliana replied as the waiter poured you a cup. A sip told her, it was brewed with synthetic water. ‘*A pity, the aroma was so tantalizing.*’ She thought as she gently pushed the cup back.

“Your meal will be out shortly.” The waiter replied with a bow before turning to go.

“Umm,” Akihiko added after sipping his cup. “Just amazing, don’t you think.”

“It is a very interesting flavor.” Aeliana replied diplomatically, but Akihiko was the type to hear what he wanted to hear. So her comment only caused him to smile smugly.

“Anyway,” he began, “I was thinking...”

Aeliana tuned him out, nodding along at the right place as she let her attention wonder. ‘*I wonder if Haruto is still working on my polymer?*’ She thought. She’d left him in a hurry, knowing she was about to be late to the part of the Festival her mother expected her to attend. ‘*Did he say he would work on it all night?*’

“Now that my brother has been promoted to Head Guardian...”

Aeliana nodded as she tried to remember Haruto’s exact phrasing. ‘*No, he said it would be working all night.*’ She kept her face attentive even as within her she was filled with confusion. ‘*What in the world is planning to do instead? It can’t be the Festival, he’s not allowed to these things.*’

“So, of course, I know he doesn’t have the time, but...”

‘Well, at least he’s running it.’ She thought. As always she’d make steady progress on her potential demonstration, but than run into a space debris. With the TARGET, she’d been able to finally run programs with the Nahua relics going so far as to develop an fool proof illusion protocol. But of course, she couldn’t use the relic in her demonstration on the final test. No, she was going to need something portable that could connect to recent technology.

“So, no I study on and off in the flotilla, which is why I’m so busy these days.” Akihiko paused for the first time.

“Oh, that’s great to hear.” She replied having missed the whole conversation, if it could be called that.

“Yes, and...”

“Zhùróng?” Aeliana turned sharply at Ilia’s voice. Standing just outside of the stall was Ilia, Kur-ram, and Kenta. Ilia looking between Aeliana and Akihiko.

‘Oh Goddess no.’ Aeliana thought. The last thing she wanted was Ilia to think she was even remotely friendly with Akihiko.

“Amur.” Akihiko replied smugly.

Ilia took a step closer, betrayal in her eyes. Aeliana wasn’t sure what to do. Inside she wasn’t to yell that she was sitting her against her will, but she was a Helian first and foremost. And she was still in the Game.

“Here you go.” The waiter replied beside them, “Two Specials.” Turning

to Aeliana he continued. “Can I get you more tea?”

“No thank you,” she replied giving her Game smile. Open and pleasant.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Akihiko spoke to Ilia, “we’re in the middle of something.”

Aeliana turned back to Ilia, and was surprised to see a small smile on her face. “Cadet Zhùróng,” she replied easier, “we’re on our way up to the stage, you coming? I’m sure Aeliana will understand. Clan business and all.”

Aeliana tried to hide her elightment at the chance of losing Akihiko, but a glance at Ilia’s face told her she wasn’t completely successful. ‘*She could always read me, even when I’m in the Game.*’ She thought. To Akihiko, she replied understandingly, “Yes, Akihiko. Don’t let me keep you.”

Akihiko looked embarrassed between them. “Uh, yeah. I’m okay.” He replied softly.

Ilia covered her mouth to hide a laugh, “Don’t tell me daddy, doesn’t want his dear old second son up their with him?”

Akihiko blushed brightly, “I have my task, you have yours.” He replied harshly.

“Is there a problem?” The manager questioned, eyeing Ilia closely. “No, sir. We were just going.” She nodded to Kur-ram and Kenta as she turned to leave. Giving Ilia one last apologetic look. ‘I’m sorry’.

Aeliana gave her a small smile in return. ‘*You tried.*’

Akihiko huffed in indignation, “The gall.” He shook his head. “Amur

acts like she one of those stuck up Gento. As if we need more of *them*."

"I am sorry to hear you won't be part of the Festival this year." Aeliana replied.

Akihiko nodded distractedly. "It's not that big a deal. The Jade Festival isn't all that special. Just another chance for the Gento to strut around like they own the place. Honestly, the Sakrá shouldn't have allowed them to control the Keepers." He continued as he dug into his food. "Treating it like their own private army."

"A small concession, I'm sure." Aeliana replied as she took a tentative bite. The meat tasted like it was also synthetic. An overall, unpleasant dish to go with an unpleasant day.

"Small?" Akihiko replied already a quarter way through his meal. Aeliana pushed hers around the plate taking very small bites the way her father taught her. "There everywhere! Not to mention the size of their flotilla." He pause to take a couple more bites of food. "If they turned on us, we'd be hard pressed to turn them back."

Aeliana nodded along although inside she wanted to argue. The Gento was *the* most loyal Clan. From what she understood, if there was anyone the Sakrá needed to worry about it was the Zhùróng Clan. Not to mention her father also seemed to think their thrust for power was something to watch. Dangerous. But she said none of that. Letting Akihiko ramble on about the Gento Clan.

"The offerings should start soon," she commented as he finished with

his meal.

He nodded, before pointing to her plate. “Not hunger?”

“No sorry,” she replied with a smile, sincere only in it’s pretense.

Not seeing anything wrong with her comment, Akihiko waved down the waiter. Aeliana raised an eyebrow as the manager hurried over. Taking their plates, he smiled giving several short bows in the process. “I hope the food was too your liking.” He spoke to her, but Akihiko answered.

“Yes, delicious as always, Uncle.” Akihiko replied holding out his hand for the check, the manager looked strained as his eyes skipped between them.

‘Now, what will you do? Insult the Helian family, or appease the Akihiko?’ Aeliana thought as she gave an open smile to the fidgeting man.

“No, no.” He finally said waving away Akihiko’s hand. “This meal is on us.”

‘Expertly done.’ Aeliana thought as she rose. “Thank you for the meal.”

“Yes, thank you Uncle.” Akihiko rose quickly to follow her.

“Yes, and do tell your parents about us, Cadet Helian. We’ve a shop in the Zhùróng Sector just off of the main road.” He called out, Aeliana pretended not to hear him as Akihiko jogged after her.

“Hey,” he smiled down at her as he caught up. “I’d offer you a seat in the Zhùróng section, but the Commander’s Halo is still out.”

Aeliana nodded, “That’s fine. My father arranged for a few viewing spots for the Guild.” She responded. Before she could say more, movement

to her right catch her attention. ‘*Is that Haruto?*’ The hair was brown, and the eyes all wrong, but general features were all the same.

“Is everything alright?” Akihiko moved into her field of vision. When she looked again, the figure that might have been Haruto was gone.

“Yes, just thought I saw someone I knew.” Aeliana replied. Turning to go to the center viewing, she wasn’t took surprised to find Akihiko trailing her despite not begin invited.

“Anyway,” he started beside her. “This year, I’m sure we’re going to have the best offering. Mother ellised 25% more donations from the Clan this year than last year. So father was able to commission an artist from the Empire.” He looked over at her as if that was something special.

‘I bet he doesn’t even know that Empire artist range in skill.’ She thought. Her own family having purchased more than twenty of the Empire’s finest for the event in the Jade Capital.

“Father’s even hosting a Special Envoy this year.” He continued in pride.
“That’s why my seats taken.”

She nodded in feigned understanding. As she made her way toward the center of Solas. *‘Where did Erik say this thing was again?’* She thought.

Buzz.

Ya lost again, kid? - Big brother Erik

Aeliana rolled her eyes in response. “Excuse me for a second.” Akihiko nodded as she stepped to the side before hitting call, she spoke, “Just send me the address.”

"What? No, how's it goin'. No, it's great to see ya? Been missin' my big brother Erik?" He responded.

"Don't even start." She replied.

"Oh, is ya time with ol stick in the mud not up to snuff?" He replied amusement in his voice.

"Erik..." She warned.

"Alright, alright. Sending. But next time, it's a search party." He answered followed by a buzz of her BISM. Looking at the directions, she motioned for Akihiko to follow.

"Thanks." She replied before ending the call.

With the direction, she was in front of a restaurant that must have been rented out for the Guild event. Akihiko looked down his nose at the young messengers running around. Aeliana's eyes, however, were on the lookout for Erik. If there was anyone who could get rid of her tail, it would be him.

"Aeliana, Aeliana!" A group of young messengers came barreling into her. "Look at all this candy!"

Kneeling down she gave a real smile, "Wow, I'm so jealous." She spoke good-naturally.

"Here," each youth pushed a piece toward her.

"We can get more." Another answered, this one missing his two front teeth.

"Well than, thank you." She replied taking only a single piece, before shooing them away. "Go enjoy the party."

They giggled as they ran off, probably to get more candy.

“I didn’t know, the Guild took in orphans?” Akihiko replied frown in his eyes was telling. “They don’t look like Kanopos children.”

“There not.” Aeliana replied shortly.

“Oh, it’s starting!” Someone yelled out as if the Goddess was finally smiled down on her.

Moving toward the big Halo screen, she stood in the crowd as they watched the offerings begin. The third tier clans would be first. Even the Sakrá had to follow that rule.

“I of the Yín Clan this silver statue for the great Yù Huáng Shàngdì.” The statue was no bigger than ten centimeters in length. A modest gift for a Clan fallen on hard times.

Akihiko snorted next to her, “Now, I’m sure they’ve gone bankrupt.”

“I of the Húsiān Clan off this cherry tree. May it’s roots grow strong for the great Yù Huáng Shàngdì.”

“Like they don’t give a cherry tree every year.” Akihiko snorted in complaint. Aeliana held her tongue.

The Sakrá stepped forward next, out of order causing the room to erupted into whispers. “I, as the Sakrá offer this jade sword on behalf of the Āshīnà Clan. A symbol of the beauty of battle.”

‘That’s strange.’ Aeliana thought sure that the Clan still had at least one member.

Akihiko leaned into her, “Pilot Āshīnà Dàocǎorén is teaching at OCI

now.” He whispered. “It’s why my brother was promoted.”

‘*What do you know, an Zhùróng can be useful.*’ She thought. Outwardly she nodded in thanks.

Stepping back, the Sakrá son took his father’s position. “I of the Wukong Clan give this jade gourd to the great Yù Huáng Shàngdì. May every sip he take from it bring him long life.”

For once, Akihiko had nothing to say to the young Wukong Clan member. Aeliana didn’t question it. The third tier Clans bowed together before taking a step back to let the next four second tier Clans approach, Ilia among them.

Aeliana’s eyes followed her ex-friend, even as the other three Clans presented their gifts. Everything else was lost in the background as Ilia stood tall next to her father. Just two years ago, the pair would have been exchanging looks while Ilia waited to go through this rehearsed gift exchange. If anyone had told Aeliana that she’d never stand behind the stage again, she’d have never believed them. But now...

“Figured the Gongsaeng could afford something better after the way Seo-Jun talked about their gift.” Akihiko complained next to her.

In that moment, she’d have given anything to turn back time.

Kur-ram followed his father back in a practiced bow as the two first tier Clans took their place. Akihiko’s father and brother standing tall in representation of the Zhùróng Clan.

“...May the Yù Huáng Shàngdì eat well with each bite.” Kenta spoke

next to his father bowing low hesitantly.

“Here we go,” Akihiko said as he father moved to speak.

The camera zoomed out as a large covered statue was wheeled out. “I of the Zhùróng Clan off the esteemed Yù Huáng Shàngdì, this offering of a jade statue in his likeness.”

Pulling the cover off, revealed a three meter statue of gold and pale jade more white than green. Even from here, Aeliana could see the quality was rather poor. The transparency was completely opaque, and she could see red in some of the pieces. *‘But from Akihiko’s admiring tone, you’d think it was made of solid imperial jade.’* She thought with a little humor. Aloud she said, “Very impressive.”

The first tier Clans bowed before stepping back. Here, the Sakrá stepped again as he had for as long as she could remember this Festival. “I have the pleasure of the Fujimi Noble Clan as well this fine Festival of Jade.” He replied with a smile. “To this end, they have offered a priceless work of art.” A historian held up the scroll gentle.

“Is that made of paper?” Aeliana caught herself saying aloud.

Akihiko said nothing beside her, but the crowded Guild member room made up with it as they all gasped in awe.

“That beats the coveralls off them Zhùróng.” Someone said in the crowd causing Aeliana to hold back a smile.

The Sakrá had a smile on his face before bowing, and stepping aside for Gento Yozora and the Kōtaishi. “Thank you, Hwasan for performing

this blessed offering on the Fujimi Clan's behalf. We are all honored and humbled to have you as our Sakrá." Yozora spoke surprisingly sincerely.

"And to you, Yozora." The Sakrá nodded to him.

Yozora looked down at his heir as she took a step forward, bowing deep and low to the symbolic Shàngdì metal statue that was in place for this Festival. "We of the Gento Clan offer the great and honorable Yù Huáng Shàngdì what is dearest to us." She bowed again as several elaborately dressed Gento carried a secured container up to her platform.

'Is that even coveralls?' She thought absentmindedly tugging on her own coveralls at the amount of fabric draped over the Gentos. They bowed first to the Shàngdì statue before bowing next to the Kōtaishi and her father. If possible an even more elaborately dressed woman with a painted face and beads of jade around her neck stepped on to the stage. Both the Kōtaishi and Yozora bowed to her as she bowed to them.

"Oh, great. Now their going to sing." Akihiko grumbled under his breath.

Aeliana was surprised when the woman on stage did begin to sign softly. Her voice going up and down in a pattern that reminded Aeliana of the Moon Festival parade. After a few minutes, she finished bowing again to the Kōtaishi and her father before turning to the container.

"Ahh!" She cried out causing the container to open on its own. Revealing a statue a meter high of pure imperial jade of the most striking woman Aeliana had ever seen.

“The Goddess.” Aeliana whispered into the rumblings of the Guild. All in awe at the gift.

“May our Goddess be your.” The Kōtaishi finished with a bow as the intricately dressed Gento left the stage.

The Sakrá stepped forward nodding approvingly. “Yes, I’m sure she will.” Turning to the camera he smiled warmly. “Now, without further adieu, shall we welcome the Honorable High Commander of the Keepers?”

Clapping sounded from the Halo screen. From experience, she knew that nearly the whole Keeper organization would be in the Clan’s section just outside of the stage. One reason, she knew, that the Clans had so few seats near the stage.

“Yonaka?” The Sakrá gestured for the Keepers’ High Commander to speak.

“Thank you, Honorable Sakrá.” He began. “First, I’d like to welcome the Captains and their Command Captain.” He said giving time for the fourteen stiffly dressed Keepers to move on stage. “This year we are honored...”

“What the?” Someone yelled out at the sight before them. The High Commander all black body armor, glowed bright orange. The color flickering across his body briefly before fading into a black-hole, Haruto’s hacker signature.

“Hēidóng?” Someone else questioned in the crowd.

‘Haruto, what have you done?’ She thought as she watched in morbid

fascination at the angry orange contrasted against Yonaka's black body armor. A second later, and the whole thing burst into color, becoming a brilliant vibrant red the same color of Haruto's hair.

But of course Haruto's prank didn't end there. No, the whole stage of Keepers body armor had changed to various shades of red. '*And I'm sure it doesn't end with the Captains either.*' She thought imaging patrol men and women with red body armor. Aeliana didn't know how he did it, and honestly didn't care.

As if on cue, what Aeliana was beginning to realize was SB3-QB9's laughter grumbled through the Halo screen.

A snort went off in the crowd, followed by another before the whole room was laughing with the somewhat demonic voice. Aeliana held back a smile herself. As long as nothing else happened, this was pretty harmless compared to his more elaborate pranks. But no sooner did the thought cross her mind, did the sound of fireworks going off.

Bang, bang, bang!

Someone called from outside, "Hey it's the Keeper Towers. Like all of them!"

Aeliana got pulled into the crowd as they rushed outside to see it the display. And sure enough, all the Keepers Towers expect for Tower One were bright red. And fireworks surrounded them. The loud burst of colors and dazzling images dancing within the Solas in an absolutely spectacular fashion. '*And using up using up countless amounts of oxygen.*' She thought

as the brilliance of the display that could have been an Zhùróng performed feature for its execution.

“Haruto.” She sighed to herself. As the Solas sky filled with a large black-hole. Followed closely the phrase, ‘We love Hēidòng’. The boy didn’t know how to be subtle.

Aeliana looked up at the artificial sky of Solas as the fireworks died down. The Guild party had clearly moved outside as children, teens, and adults alike danced in the streets excited by Haruto’s display. In the distance, large red Towers stood proudly all over Kanopos.

“Hēidòng!” Was yelled from the Halo screens as movement hit the streets. Aeliana took a step back as someone nearly ran her over. Strong hands caught her before she could fall.

Looking up, she was surprised to see Erik by her side, “I think we might wanna get outta here, yeah?”

She nodded as they headed out the back. The Keepers would have a hard time getting everyone under control after this. Which was going to be the least of their concerns, as no sooner had they stepped into the back alley did the whole ship go dark.

“Star dust!” Someone cursed, and Aeliana wasn’t sure if it was her or Erik.

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Tap. Tap. Tap.

Aeliana's footsteps sounded in the hallway of Tower One. Here, emergency power had returned but every few steps the orange shallow lights would flicker on and off.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Aeliana slow and steady footsteps grounded her in this unthinkable situation. Beside her came the quick steps of her parents best lawyer and family friend, Lieb Sara. Her soft breathily close and calming. The lights flickered staying off for a second longer than usual. Aeliana paused taking a shallow breath as her eyes fluttered shut.

Sara's hand gentle touched Aeliana's arm. Giving it a comfortable squeeze. Aeliana regained her footing and continued on. Before them the Command Captain Gento Daichiko had not gotten too far ahead of them. The stern looking woman turned slightly waiting for them to catch up, but otherwise showed no signs of well anything. Which, given that she was a Gento, wasn't all that surprising.

Even so, none of that changed the fact that the Command Captain

herself was going to be interrogating her. '*I should be honored.*' Aeliana thought bitterly.

After a long day at the Jade Festival, she just wanted to go home and relax. There she wouldn't need to worry about any of this.

The group paused as Keepers rushed out of double bolted room. Aeliana looked in to see a strile looking white room. Metal table, metal chair, and black glass. Chains linked from the floor, and two cameras in just the first glance. The door shut and they moved on.

'So, I'm not being interrogated there, huh.' She thought as she continued to follow.

"How much longer are you going to parade my client?" Her lawyer questioned harshly.

Command Captain Daichiko turned her head briefly to respond. "Not much further."

"Good, because the kindness of the Helian family can only extend so much. Especial after this very trying day." Sara answered in her slightly accented voice.

In response, the Command Captain stopped in front the next door. "Understandable." She replied diplomatically. "This should be it. Please." Motioned them inside as the door opened.

Aeliana stepped into what looked like one of her parents higher end conference rooms. A comfortable looking couch lined the wall, a long circular table in the center surrounded by high quality chairs meant for long

meetings. It was something even her mother would approve of, and given the pleased look on Sara face it was acceptable accommadations.

'If that means anything.' Aeliana thought. Be it a couch or a hard metal chair, this was still an interrogation. She didn't care what they were trying to called it.

"Thank you again, Cadet Helian for sitting down with us for this interview." Command Captain Daichiko replied as she pulled out one of the comfortable chairs for Aeliana to sit in.

Aeliana nodded her head in thanks as she took the offered seat. *'At least the chairs are comfortable.'*

The Command Captain moved to offer Sara a seat as well, but she pulled her own out instead.

A handful of Keepers stood at the open door, the Command Captain motioned to them, "Can we offer you something to drink, eat? Anything to make you more comfortable?"

Aeliana shook her head in the negative.

"My client just wants to go home, Captain," Sara answered for her.

Aeliana looked away at finding a window with an amazing view of Solas.

"Of course, then let's get started," Command Captain Daichiko began as she took a seat. Tilting her head slight she continued. "Camera please."

A panel opened up revealing a camera. The red light blinking open told Aeliana that it was recording. "For the record, you are Cadet Helian Aeliana born FDY 256 born to..."

“Talia and Atticus Helian, or however you people say it.” Sara interrupted the Command Captain.

The Command Captain continued as if not interrupted, “Standing council for Cadet Helian is...”

“Sara Lieb L.L. and a bunch of other titles we don’t have time to go over. Please, if we could speed this up.” Sara added pointedly.

“Cadet Helian, you currently attend KANP with Cadet Hēidòng Haruto.”

“And six Clan members, four of which are heirs, not to mention another two dozen or so of *regular* folks.” Sara interrupted.

“Be that as it may, recently you’ve spent a great deal of time in Cadet Hēidòng’s company.” Command Captain Daichiko

Sara leaned in as she spoke for Aeliana, “And before that Aeliana spent just as much if not more time with Ilia Amur.” Sara’s eyes narrowed. “What’s your point, Captain?”

The Command Captain didn’t even flinch at the inappropriate title. “It was not Cadet Amur’s family name written in Solas, Ms. Lieb, but Cadet Hēidòng.” She answered. “For the record, we must describe the connection.”

“Loss connection.” Sara answered.

“Furthermore, I would like to remind you both,” Captain Daichiko looked at Aeliana as she spoke. “This is not an interrogation. Cadet Helian has done nothing wrong. Please understand that you are here to help us find Cadet Hēidòng Haruto for his crimes...”

“Alleged crimes.” Sara interrupted.

“Against KTS Kanopos,” she continued as if not interrupted.

“That hardly explains what my client can do for you.” Sara responded.

“Currently, Cadet Hēidòng’s whereabouts are unknown. Given your relationship...”

“Which I must again state was no different than for many of her other classmates,” Sara interrupted.

“Nevertheless, we believe you might have information that will help us locate him.” Command Captain finished.

“For what?” Sara demanded, “So you can illegal detain him for days on end? Arrest him at school or his own home without good cause?” Sara shifted in her seat as she continued, “Given your track record, it’s no surprise the boy wants to stay out of sight.”

Captain Daichiko’s lip twitched very slightly the only outward indicator of her thoughts. “All arrests made by my Keepers are within the bounds of the law.”

Sara gave a bark of laughter, “Law? Please spare me the speech as we both know none of those incidents I’m speaking about would hold up in court. You should just be glad I’m not his lawyer, because I’d have sued you ten times over by now.”

Aeliana turned away as the bitter back and forth continued. The Command Captain defending her peoples actions, while Sara roughly dismantled it all. It was all seemingly pointless. *‘This is going to take all day if I don’t say something.’* She thought.

"And another thing," Sara took a breath giving Aeliana the opportunity to cut in. Holding her hand out, the room went silent.

"What's the point?" Aeliana spoke in the silence. "Why do you think Haruto would every say anything to you even if you could find him?"

"Note that my client is not suggesting she knows where he is. Only asking what we all want to know the true motives behind this interrogation desguished as an interview." Sara

Command Captain Daichiko paused looking off slightly in the distance. Listening to something only she could hear. A slight nod and she turned to face Aeliana directly. "This is not prank..."

-gives a big speech about how badly the prank damaged the ship. It will take months maybe even a year to fix the problems... the blackouts aren't going away. What they need is a starting point to speed up the process. They hope they can implore Haruto to give up how he attacked the Towers so that they can fix the problem.

-Aeliana shakes her head, knowing that's not going to work on Haruto. "I really don't know him that well. He's either at the warehouse, his apartment, or Santuarary Park."

"All places you've already searched."

Daichiko looks at Aeliana as if seeing if she's telling the truth. And she was, Haruto spent time in the Pray Alley because that was here his Princess was at. "Honestly, I don't even know where his apartment is."

-Lawyer gets up to go. says something about how their done here

-Daichiko shakes the Lawyers offered hand, if you remember anything that could help. Please contact us.

-We have your number. (guides Aeliana out of the room)

They leave and Sara switches languages, it takes a second for Aeliana to remember (her mother's tongue).

"You did great, kid."

"It helps that I don't actually know where he would be."

Sara snorts and pinches her cheek. "You think that matters." Aeliana brushes her hand away as they make their way out of Tower One. "Anyway, Talia owes me a drink for this one. Your little friend's probably committed some four maybe even five different felonies."

"Allegelly, right?"

Sara shrugged, remaining silent as a couple of Keepers passed them. "Your boy's hacker signature was all over it. Honestly, I could probably put him away for less."

"That's not what you said back there."

Sara waved her concern away, "The Keepers are sloppy, and don't really know what their doing when it comes to domestic issues. That's the problem with these paramilitary types."

They pause at the door. "Oh."

"Come on, let's get you home." Sara said as her hand lay gently on her back.

Stepping out into Solas properly, Aeliana looked off in the direction of

Lower Level. If Haruto was anywhere it would be in those twisted streets, but the Keepers would, should, know that. '*Stay out of trouble Haruto.*' She thought before moving forward.

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The first time Tatsuki had left her alone. If she was going to warn, Haruto, and she must warn Haruto, then she would have to do it now.

MPrincess: Don't show you're face, Haru.

GhostHacker: I'll be okay, Princess.

MPrincess: Haruto this is serious. The council is involved.

GhostHacker: The council gets involved when I have a hang nail.

MPrincess: But this time, Father personally wants your head.

MPrincess: You humiliated Uncle. You humiliated the Clan.

There was along pause when the Gento heir was left alone with her thoughts.

GhostHacker: Yakei...

Foxy999: I'll watch out for the kid. No worries Princess.

MPrincess: Thank you, SB3-QB9.

Interrupted.

Part two of blackout... Not sure what should go here... This is in Yakei's point of view.

Will start with her, and her perspective of the Blackout.

The pale moonlight was bright in the night sky illuminating the world beneath it. Stationary buildings reflecting the soft light left the area in a strange eerie glow. Its penetrating white light illuminating the resting inhabitants within the confines of each imposing structure.

Yakei slept peacefully under the pale glow of the moon. The slow steady flow of her breathing went undisturbed as time ticked by slowly. One invariable breath after another. One unfaltering heart beat after another. She slept on. Suddenly, without visible change and without any noticeable indicators, her eyes snapped open. And she awoke.

Staring at the plain tiled ceiling above her, Yakei made no move to rise. She held still. Gazing motionlessly at the ceiling, she did not bother to look around. After all, she had little reason to, long ago having memorized the simple layout of her quarters. Besides the oak desk pressed against the far wall, there was nothing of note within the confines of her space. No elaborate paintings to gaze upon. No colorful decorations to break the endless expanse of monotony. Not even a clock placed high upon a wall or low upon the small bedside table. There was nothing.

Of course, she'd long ago come to terms with the lack of dècor. As Honorable Father always said, the world was filled with distraction. There was no need to bring it into one's only calm space. Of course, now that she was older, she also realized the political reasons for living minimally. In a ninja village within a prominent ninja clan, those of power and wealth were frowned upon if they highlighted their elevated status with petty displays of frivolous artifacts. A leader must always put the needs of their people above the needs of their own. As such, interesting artifacts and paintings had no place within the main house manor, much less her own quarters.

It wasn't as if she had need for any such articles. She'd spent so little time in her room that paintings and decorations were a waste of resources. She had little use for those types of trinkets and babbles. Additionally, a clock would be another such unnecessary object as she hadn't needed one to aid her in discerning the time for many years. As she'd never been allowed the use of one, she'd developed her own means of telling time.

Whether Honorable Father had intended for her to become wholly independent of time devices, a theory she was more than willing to accept given his constant insistence that she be independent in all ways. Or perhaps he had simply wanted to reinforce the importance of patience, she did not know. However, it was because of Honorable Father's strict directives that there would be no visible clocks within the compound that had enabled her to learn the much-valued skill. As such, she currently held no use for the objects.

Inhaling deeply, Yakei estimated the time. 0447. She had another thirteen minutes before she was to begin her day. Thirteen minutes before everything changed, and she wasn't quite sure how she should feel about that. Today would not be like any other day. And unfortunately, she lacked the luxury of knowing that all would return to the same familiar schedule she'd grown so accustomed to tomorrow, or even the next day.

No, today was the beginning of a new stage in her life. Today, she would begin the process of becoming a Genin. Today, she would be one step closer to taking over her clan. One step closer to taking her rightful place within the village. She knew she was ready to take this step. However, that knowledge did not stop the small amount of anxiety from running through her veins.

For almost as long as she could remember, she'd been on a strict routine. It had varied little within the last eight years. And now. Now, that routine would be shattered completely. While she was sure she could force some sort of structure onto her new life, she knew that it would not be the same. There would be no one to usher her from one activity to the next. There would be very little one on one instruction. There would be less time spent under Honorable Father's heavy, analytical gaze. In the eyes of the village and in the eyes of the clan, she would be an adult. She would be officially responsible for her actions as well as the actions of her future teammates.

While she was confident that she would succeed in her future endeavors, these were the tasks that she'd been instructed in for the last eight years,

she could not shake the small amount of anxiety that whispered in her ears that she might falter in her path to success. She might stumble on the way and while that would be a minor setback, such a misstep would disappoint Honorable Father. And she could not disappoint him.

She could not disappoint the man that had taken so much of his personal time to painstakingly instruct her in the ways of the clan. Even if she struggled to master a clan technique, he had not given up on her. He had pushed and pushed until she'd gotten it correct, and then he had pushed further so that it was not only executed perfectly, but ingrained in her every movement. No matter what, she could not disappoint him.

Of course she realized that these worries were unfounded. Given what she knew of the Ninja Academy training which was quite a lot due to the fact that she'd spent half a year studying and evaluating the Hyuuga Academy, Police Academy and the Ninja Academy training regiments, she would be hard pressed to disappoint Honorable Father today. All the same, it would have been nice if she had someone to talk to about these fears. However, she was Yotsugi, and the Yotsugi does not fear, at least she doesn't show it.

Of course she might be able to confide in Captain Tatsuki, her only confidant within an endless sea of people, but even here she hesitated. She would always be Yotsugi, and as such she would always have certain standards to maintain even with her only confidant. And really, this small anxiety was beneath her. Moreover, she would not be the only person

affected by the changes that this day represented. Her routine was not the only one changing today. More so than anyone else in the entire clan holdings, Captain Tatsuki's routine would be drastically effected by this inevitable next step.

Yakei could still remember the last time she'd changed her retainer's routine. She'd been six years old and accustomed to her usual wake up time. Thinking she would save Captain Tatsuki the trouble of waking her for the day, she had gotten up and ready for the day all by herself. She'd been so proud of her accomplishment that she'd nearly missed the cast fallen look on her retainer's face. Even at such a young age she'd been aware that she'd done something wrong.

It had been then, at the tender age of six, that she'd learned that her actions had consequences. She'd learned that she had to consider all possible outcomes when deciding what to do. She'd realized that just because she could do something, didn't always mean that she should. And she'd taken that knowledge to heart.

It was the reason Yakei currently found herself staring at the white tiles of her ceiling though she'd been up and ready to start the day for the last ten minutes. It was why she would continue to lay here for another three minutes despite the fact that she'd long ago memorized the tile layout above her. Even when she was only occupied with her own thoughts, she refused to upset those around her unnecessarily. Boredom was not an adequate reason to cause pain.

Additionally, she found that she quite enjoyed the small amount of happiness she could bestow on those around her. If she could provide that small amount of happiness via her actions, or in this case inaction, then she would do so. Especially if she could do so without resorting to actions unbecoming of the Yotsugi. It was the least she could do.

Motionless, Yakei continued to stare at her ceiling. If she knew Captain Tatsuki like she thought she did, then her head retainer would be just a tad bit early to start the day. Yakei listened to the soft, strong beat of her own heart as she waited the last minute before the official start of her day. She would need to modify her morning training schedule if she wanted to use her morning efficiently.

On a normal day, the Ninja Academy started at 0900, but given the nature of today the start time had been pushed back an hour. The theory behind such an action was to give potential graduates the little extra time they might need to prepare for the exam. Whether that was by extra study or simply more rest, it was a nice but misguided notion. In her experience, one extra hour for the average student would make little difference in their overall performance.

The muffled sound of her door sliding open broke Yakei from her thoughts. Captain Tatsuki was indeed a little early this morning.

“Yotsugi-dono, it is time to begin the day,” Captain Tatsuki spoke as she moved about the room getting Yakei’s training garbs out in the process.

“Arigatou Captain Tatsuki. Your assistance is much appreciated,” Yakei

responded as she slid out of bed. It was time to face the day.

* * * * *

“Captain Tatsuki, your presence is not required. I am quite capable of walking to the Ninja Academy on my own,” Yakei insisted despite the fact that she was positive her retainer would not allow her to make the journey on her own. After all, it would hurt no one to try.

“Hai Yotsugi-dono, you’re correct. I have no doubt in your capacity to make the excursion on your own. You are capable of many great things to the honor of our clan. However, as I’ve reminded you on several occasions, it is my honor to escort you. Given the nature of the day, I would think even Genshirou-sama would grant my small request. Since it’s his duty to be an even bigger hard ass than honorable Hiashi-dono, I would hope that you would not deny me this one request,” Captain Tatsuki replied with a small smile on her lips as she took her customary spot one-step behind and to the right of Yakei.

Captain Tatsuki was Captain Tatsuki, and her assurance that Yakei would allow her request on this issue was clear in her voice and in her stance. Yakei could no more deny Captain Tatsuki the pleasure of waking her up in the morning, let alone a simple request to walk with her as was Captain Tatsuki’s right as head retainer. Captain Tatsuki continued alongside her, knowing already the outcome of her request even if Yakei could not vocalize it. And Yakei did not dare answer her request for fear that emotion might escape her.

Captain Tatsuki knew her so well, and Yakei could say that she was perhaps her only friend, if the somewhat distant woman could be called as such. As always she had that innate ability to bring out the very un-Hyuuga like behavior in her. Perhaps it was because Captain Tatsuki had been taking care of her for the entirety of Yakei's life. Yakei mentally shook herself of her thoughts. Now was not the time for her to contemplate that oddity. Instead, she started forward, confident that Captain Tatsuki would follow without a reply.

"Ah, just as I predicted. Today will be a very beautiful day," Captain Tatsuki began as they made their way towards the Academy. "This is a good omen," she nodded not expecting her charge to join in the conversation. This was how most of their conversation went, nowadays. "You shall do spectacularly today greatly honoring the clan," she continued, not at all bothered by Yakei's silence. By now, Captain Tatsuki was more than capable of maintaining their one-sided conversation.

"Of course that is to be expected," Captain Tatsuki continued, occasionally nodding to a familiar face as they passed. "You have brought our clan the greatest of honors since the day of your birth. Still, for whatever reason, I feel as if you will experience a different kind of challenge today. Something beyond the mental and physical challenges of the Genin exam."

"I, of course, will be faced with the challenge of finding something to do with myself. I think I'll practice with Genshirou-sama. He's always badgering me to spar more with him. It's always how do you expect to

protect Yotsugi-dono if you do not practice'. I keep telling him that the day you need my assistance is the day that life as we know it will change. Of course, I'll still practice. The physical aspects of training has always been my favorite. And with you beginning your ninja career, I'll have more time to hone my skills. Even so, he keeps forgetting that I have more to do than him. The honorable Hiashi-dono has not needed his direct assistance in years."

Taking a breath, Yakei paused in front of the Academy building. They were there sooner than she would have imagined, but Yakei was unsurprised. She was positive that Captain Tatsuki had done that on purpose to distract her from the unknown soon to come. The constant chatter, soft and meant for her ears only, was oddly calming. As much as her life was about to change, it seemed that Captain Tatsuki would never change. At least this aspect of her life, the one very permanent fixture would always remain the same.

Captain Tatsuki took one-step forward, bringing her level with Yakei, before turning to her charge. "Yotsugi-dono, you have always made the clan proud, and you will always continue to do so because that is who you are. Remember to always hold your head high. You are a Hyuuga. No one is above you," Captain Tatsuki softly declared, as she looked straight into Yakei's eyes. Yakei could feel the ghost of the gentle touch that would have rested briefly on her shoulders had they been alone in the solitude of her own quarters. With a short nod, Yakei turned to enter the building, the

phantom touch still ghosting along her shoulder. She didn't need to ask to know that Captain Tatsuki would be waiting for her when she was done. Some things just didn't need to be said.

— 39 —

Final chapter... Kanopos nearly destroyed Aeliana going to her meeting with Sergeant Sang-eo in the red light district near his apartment... He'd made a promise to tell her the results as soon as he knew them.

The Sergeant wanted to tell her right away that she did not make the OCI, and that he'd fought for her.

Aeliana doesn't know what to do about it. It's late, and she couldn't face her parents, so she goes to the warehouse.

At the door to the warehouse, the ship goes into red alert. Haruto's picture up on the emergency Halo screens (except for the commander's screen which was still out of commission). -wanted for questioning about break-in to the Hokage's tower

Curses Haruto out loud before entering the building. Finds Haruto there. She tears into him.

Haruto "First, no one can prove I was there."

Aeliana gave him a look.

Haruto "Second, I can explain."

Haruto tells Aeliana about the deal, Sergeant Yú gave him to get into OCI.

Aeliana is upset that he believed it.

Haruto tells her that he didn't fully, but if there was a change then he had to take it. If I'd known you didn't make it either, I'd have let you end on it. In fact, I got you a copy, just in case.

Aeliana about to yell at him.

And I didn't give him the real thing. Just this dumby stuff.

"Where are you suppose to meet?" Aeliana

"Well, technically, we already met. He said, I was in now, but I guess that was a lie too huh."

Haruto looks in thought, "Well he won't get far, with that."

"What did you give him?"

"The old man's porn stash."

Aeliana knows, that Haruto calls the Sakra the old man, so she puts that together and blushes.

The ship goes down at this moment.

Haruto says he didn't to that!

...Aeliana uses her big brain to figure out what happened... ...we get a look at the SKIMs at full power...

...Haruto builds the chip they need after Aeliana looks at the real data...

...They have everything, but Aeliana realizes that they need top level access, she's talking out loud...

...Haruto says he knows just the person to help...

— 40 —

This chapter is from Erik's point of view as he follows the trail to find his little sister.

-the ship is in evac mode, his adoptive parents will not go into their hiberative sleep until Aeliana is found...

this first thing Erik does is go to the Helian house, he greets his adoptive parents, but asks why they are not in hibernative sleep

Aeliana is missing, they won't go to sleep until she is found. They tried to reach her at the warehouse, but no one is picking up on the emergency line...

Erik vows to find her, his job to protect the heir... parents say he's more important to them than just that...

He smiles, and turns to go... get into your hibernation, I've got Aeliana
First stop is the warehouse, he uses his comms to call his contacts in the LL... using Guild backup power, as soon as this was over, he was putting his little sister on the Guild grid too... AIMs be damned

She's not at the warehouse... he investigates... looks like they were hear (turns on his heat signature vision), worked on this console... he tries to

log on, but is blocked...

going to have to hack in the hard way, goes for the wires, but sees that it's offline... that was going to be a dead end... their signatures were still fresh, so they couldn't have gotten far...

he gets a reply about movement, say the Helian heir... Erik as if there was a little red head with her... guy pauses to ask around... no one noticed anything like that, thanks, over and out

so either Hēidòng was with her or she was on her own... he hoped the kid was with her, but wouldn't take any chances... this would be the perfect time to kidnap the heir with all the confusion...

Aeliana's been practicing, she's not defenseless... he nodded before heading out to the last known location

ends up in Prayer Alley, patrols are everywhere here, '*Probably securing the Kōtaishi*' he thinks... moving along, he tries to figure out what they were doing here...

gets no sign of them, pulls a patrol aside and asks... first don't want to work with him, but he shows his Guild badge... the guys eyes widen, before he starts apologizing, sorry sir...

just tell me what you know about Hēidòng? How does he travel?

Ah, well. Rooftops mostly, but if you're tracking him, you'd have better luck with something else... he knows the skyline better than anyone, and can walk along the catwalk without extra protective gear...

thanks,

he takes to the rooftops, breathing a little heavy after the climb, I've got to work out more

If she's with him, he won't take the catwalk, so where would they go?

Get's a call, a couple of spotting... Erik head in the direction of Tower One...

Aeliana wouldn't be involved in one of the kid's pranks. What is going on?

All this time, the ship is slowly failing, less and less people are here are most have them have evacuated to hibernation chambers...

Erik goes to Tower One, people are working overtime to prepare the ship... it is here where he and the Captain Daisuke experience shockwaves from fighting in the Hokage's Tower -Erik was escorted to the command hub...

They rush over to the Hokage's Tower, the room not doing well... finally they get to the central command hub

"Aeliana," he calls out... surrounding her is the Gento heir in their key fighting stance, hovering over a body...

"You are in my range," the heir says darkly...

"No, Princess, it's fine. I know him." Aeliana answers, but the Kōtaishi doesn't loosen her stance, so Erik lets Aeliana come to him...

What's going on...

he sees bodies all around them... blaster damage... but a second later the ship seems to becoming back to life

“Long story, but first Haruto needs medical care.”

should end around there...