

Chapter XI - Pinz

Planet Felitty

Pinz Ailoraw put her palm to the ground as her leather boots slid backward over the glass floor of the research facility or museum or wherever it was supposed to be. She lifted her head as she came to a halt to face her opponent — a mobster with a shaved head, tattoos snaking down his arms, and a featureless, latex mask concealing his visage. The floor was studded with dim LED lights that illuminated him from underneath, outlining him in an eerie green glow.

"Give up, girl, you're making me feel embarrassed for you," the mobster growled.

"Let me save you from your embarrassment!" Pinz snapped back.

Pinz rose and charged toward him, her boots clacking against the glass panes, her shoulder-length, twin pigtails flapping behind her like a pair of little, jet-black wings. She spread her arms to her sides, extending dark-orange claws from her fingertips just as the mobster crossed his arms and sprouted claws of his own. She performed a couple of handsprings successively, rapidly leaping past several workstations and showcases. After swinging back to her feet one more time, she took a swipe at her opponent's face.

The mobster interposed his claws to deflect her attack and parried with a stab directed at her gut. Pinz hunched her back to stay out of reach and then dug her hands into his shoulders. She vaulted over his head to land behind him and used the momentum to pull him overhead and slam him to the floor. The pane cracked under him with a crunch, and the light underneath went out with a spark. Did I throw him a tad too hard? Pinz wondered.

Her concern quickly evaporated as she felt the mobster's legs striking her ankles. Her legs gave way, and the floor swiftly rushed up to meet her. Her face mere inches from the floor, she braced her hands against the floor to break her fall and then cartwheeled toward the mobster. She landed on top of him and pinned him to the ground with her knees.

"Is it still me you're feeling embarrassed for, huh?" Pinz scoffed, threateningly pointing her claws very close to his eyes.

The mobster's eyeballs shifted rapidly from the claws hanging over them to Pinz and back. He closed his eyes.

Pinz let out a laugh. "That's right, go to sleep, and I won't hurt you anymore."

She retracted her claws, got up, and turned to go. Just as she took a step, she heard a gun cocking. "Don't move," the mobster croaked behind her.

Pinz froze for a second. Then, gradually, she turned around. A dark-orange and chartreuse gun was aimed at her.

"Goodbye," the mobster said and pulled the trigger.

The weapon discharged with a loud zap, and Pinz clenched her eyes shut as the dark-orange light blinded her. Everything went silent for a bit except a faint ringing in her ears.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. The mobster pulled the trigger again, twice.

"You can drop your toy, Kalin," Pinz said unfazed.

The mobster looked back unbelievably. "But... how... what are you?"

"Oh, just a mer. Although one whose skeleton and skin has been infused with tensimax nanotrons, which means your puny weapons won't work on me," Pinz said, crossing her arms. "I am... an Elemort!"

"And cut!" the assistant director yelled.

Bastelle got up from the director's chair and cried out, "And we have it!"

Everyone in the studio burst into applause as Pinz took a deep breath. Overhead, some extra lights on the fixtures flicked on to life, revealing the world beyond the set. Pinz meekly put up her hands to join in the clapping. The stunt double sprang up from the ground and joined in as well, clapping much more excitedly. It took a whole minute for the applause to cease.

"Good gracious, somebody get me some water!" Pinz said, exhaling loudly, and marched away from the stage toward the crew.

The whitewashed sound stage, which a few moments ago had been deadly quiet and still as the night, now echoed with the chattering and the footsteps of a hundred strong crew, whirring of the camera drones and heavy rigging being dismantled. It had been a long, long day and Pinz had no way of knowing what time of the day it must be. A crew member brought her a glass of water, which she emptied in one, big gulp.

Bastelle strutted up to Pinz, her arms spread apart. A plump, middle-aged woman, she was dressed in a beige pantsuit with most of her thick, dark-brown hair tied into an elegant bun while some of it fell over to frame her round face.

"Thank you so much, Pinz! I really, really wanted this sequence in one shot," she said, hugging Pinz.

"Yes, you made that very clear," Pinz said, faking a laugh. "Uh... could you please not hug me right now? I am boiling in this catsuit."

It was a red, leather zippered catsuit with black accents along with black, fingerless gloves and knee-high boots. Her shoulder-length hair was tied, as usual, in her signature high pigtails with red hair ties. When she was new in the industry, she had gotten a lot of grief for clinging on to such a 'ridiculous' hairdo, but she had been stubborn. Now her pigtails were as iconic and recognizable as her heart-shaped face with sparkling, green eyes.

"Oh," said Bastelle and stepped away. She then clasped her hands excitedly. "So, ready for the wrap party?"

"Yeah, totally! But only for like an hour, though. Eight-thirty, right? What time is it now?"

"Oh, five-ish. Can I talk to you about... um... may I know if...?"

"If I'm still going?"

"Yes?"

"Yes, I'm still going."

Bastelle let out a sigh in dismay. "Oh. I thought you'd say that." She paused for a moment. "I happened to dig up some information about that tournament. You would probably like to hear it."

"You can't 'happen' to dig up information now, can you? Anyway, at the party, Bastelle, not now. Even then, the chances of you changing my mind are very slim."

"Not with what I've got to tell you."

"As you say." Pinz shrugged. "Later, then."

"See ya." Bastelle waved to her as Pinz walked past.

Pinz made her way out of the sound stage and stepped outside into the backlot. Twilight had gathered outside as the sun was setting behind the flat-topped Itafel Mountains lining the city's northern end. The skyscrapers towering beyond the studio complex were dappled in pinks and oranges. In the eastern sky, four of the nine Felitte moons were shining bright in their various phases — Jagwe, Leuwayo, Phoeen, and Ika. The fifth and the smallest of them all, Katij, had only half appeared. Perhaps, tonight will be a six-moon night, Pinz thought.

The massive studio complex still bustled with activity as the staff transported props, costumes, equipment, and other paraphernalia in motor carts between the numerous stages. In the distance to her right, Pinz spied a shooting going on between buildings made to look like those from medieval Riflamia.

Pinz strode across the brilliantly lit backlot toward her fifty-foot-long, red trailer, gleaming in the overhead white LED lights. She stepped up to the door set in its middle and pushed it open. A flash of orange pounced on her, almost making her tip over backward.

"Aw, I missed you too, Puff," she said, embracing and caressing the adorable, ginger fluffball in her arms. The cat purred and rubbed her little, round head against Pinz's cheeks. Her only sincere and unconditional friend, Puff, had been her constant companion since she was not even an action star.

Pinz looked around at her home away from home. The sight of the cozy living room with the leather couches against the walls made her already feel much less tired. As she moved her gaze to the front end of the living room, Seluna emerged from a door set in the front wall.

"You're back!" she proclaimed excitedly.

She had long, auburn hair tied back into a high ponytail with big, brown eyes and sharp lips. She was wearing an all-black pantsuit with silver heels. Seluna came a close second in Pinz's list of friends. Pinz met her five years ago at an awards ceremony when Pinz was still a starlet in need of an agent. Seluna approached her on behalf of a talent agency and since then had proven quite helpful in procuring projects, but more so as a constant source of encouragement. Whenever Pinz felt down and depressed, she had only to listen to Seluna's shower of praises to be back on track. Seluna no longer worked at the talent agency, instead now solely being Pinz's manager.

"She was getting very fidgety today," Seluna said, motioning toward Puff. "You took so long."

"I know. It's just Bastelle and her obsession with single takes," Pinz said with a sigh and started walking to the back. Puff gave a loving purr and licked her cheek. "That can be a nightmare to work with."

"So, anyway, our voyage has been confirmed at nine forty-five. Everything is packed and ready. There will be a welcoming team from the fighting tournament organizers waiting for your arrival on Karomoz. You just need to attend the party now."

"Thanks for everything, Seluna. You know, she asked me again if I am going to the tournament," Pinz said, stopping in front of the sliding doors at the back end of the living room. She pressed a button, and the doors slid apart. "Said she has something to tell me about it that will make me change my mind. I can't believe how hard she is trying to stop me from—"

Seluna immediately stepped in Pinz's way and quickly pressed the button again. The doors slid close.

"What?" Pinz asked, bewildered.

"The makeup and wardrobe guys are waiting right there in your room, Pinz. What if they hear you? They might even have heard you! These things spread fast in this industry, and it's never good. You should know by now!"

"Oh, I know that," Pinz said, rolling her eyes. "And yes, if they are in the room, they probably heard me. I don't care. She has been on my case for a month now. My patience is wearing thin."

"Fine. Do you want me to try to reschedule the voyage earlier if you'd rather not face her?"

"I have to face her, but yes, try to reschedule it by nine at the latest."

"As you wish."

"Can I go inside now?" Without waiting for a response, Pinz pressed the button again and entered the master bedroom.

The red walls inside were all adorned with pictures of Puff and her, each with its own light fixture. My favorite people, Pinz always thought. The canopied bed on the far side of the room with its white sheets and feathery, red quilt enticed her like anything, but first, she had to get rid of her makeup and costume.

A guy, who looked more like a carpenter in his denim overalls and a girl in a leopard print, faux fur shawl stood solemnly next to the dressing table opposite the bed. Their vacant stares made Pinz feel like they were staring into her soul. Oh, whatever, Pinz thought.

"Alright, let's get on with it," Pinz chirped, deposited Puff onto the bed, and sat in the chair.

When the two of them were done, the guy spoke up, "We can collect the costume later if you wish."

"Oh, that would be nice. Thank you," Pinz replied politely.

As they left, Pinz stepped into the bathroom. She took a warm, relaxing bath in the tub and emerged in a red bathrobe.

Puff bounded into the middle of the bed, claiming the choicest spot for herself, and let out a soft, beckoning meow at Pinz. She did not bother to change into her pajamas and crashed into the bed. She wondered if she should set the alarm for later but decided not to. Seluna will wake me up, was her last thought before she fell sound asleep.

Seluna did not wake me up, was Pinz's first thought as she sat up in bed and stared at the wall clock. It was already nineteen past eight. Her head was still groggy from the sleep, and her bed seemed particularly unwilling to let her part. For a moment, she considered ditching the party altogether and getting some more sleep, but she knew she had no choice.

She threw back her quilt and hurriedly got ready, donning a red spaghetti strap evening gown reaching down to her thighs with a lavender sash tied in a bowknot over one shoulder. She grabbed a pair of silver, heeled sandals, switched to lavender hair ties for her pigtails, and headed out of the room. Puff, who had woken up from the ruckus Pinz had kicked up, scampered over to her, and meowed indignantly so that Pinz had to pick her up.

In the living room, Seluna was hunched over the coffee table, wearing a holo-headset.

"Seluna, I'm late!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't wanna disturb you," Seluna said, removing her headset. "Your car's ready, though."

"Let's go," Pinz said and headed for the main door.

"And oh, our departure is at nine twenty-five now. We should leave by nine," Seluna said, looking at her watch.

Night had fallen outside, and the sixth moon, Sliva, had appeared. Pinz's red Vinn Regal sedan stood waiting. As they hopped in, the car gunned down the backlot and onto the film city's main boulevard. The wrap party was supposed to be in the event complex at the eastern end of the massive film city.

As usual, when they rode through the area open to the general public, throngs of paparazzi and tourists flocked to her car, eager to get a glimpse of her. Pinz let her window down and waved at them as the driver struggled to make his way across. She always liked waving at her fans.

It took a long time for them to take a turn and finally make it again to the area cordoned off from the public. They arrived at the open-air parkland where the party had been organized. Two gigantic boards had been erected on each side of the entrance archway bearing the movie's prototype poster — The Bion 2. Her pictures in various outfits throughout the film were featured side by side.

They stopped at the red carpet leading into the park grounds, and Pinz got out, Puff in her arms. Bastelle, who apparently had been waiting for her, came over and hugged her again, almost squishing Puff in between.

"You're so late!" Bastelle said, chuckling.

"I'm sorry, I overslept," Pinz said, subtly parting away from Bastelle.

"Come, let's head over to somewhere a bit more private. We've got a lot of talking to do," Bastelle said, leading Pinz away by her hand. "Seluna, please enjoy yourself. Pinz will be right back."

Pinz followed Bastelle, weaving her way through the sea of velvet-covered tables, exquisite couches, dainty fairy lights, and balloons in a multitude of colors and posts with delicate flowering vines twirling around them. A sweet melody played on a violin, though Pinz did not get the chance to see where it was coming from.

They crossed a little, wooden bridge over a bubbling, artificial stream to a small island. Finally, they arrived at a gazebo with a long, curved bench along with a circular table underneath.

As they sat on opposite ends, Puff in Pinz's lap, a waitress placed glasses of banana shakes for them. Pinz had not had anything since the afternoon and immediately took a deep gulp of the shake.

"You were so amazing throughout, Pinz," Bastelle said, taking a sip. "I think even the first Bion was nowhere near as—"

"Can we please cut to the chase, Bastelle? You wanted to tell me something about the fighting tournament?" Pinz asked, finishing her drink.

Bastelle smiled. "But, of course, Pinz." She took another sip and leaned in toward Pinz. "Pinz, have you ever considered why you were invited to this tournament?"

Pinz did not like where this was going at all. "So that I can participate?"

"C'mon, Pinz, I mean, why you, specifically? These other fighters — almost all of them have won championships of one sort or another on their planets. Nobody has ever seen you fight. Other than the movies, of course." Bastelle shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, I know you are more than capable of holding your own, but they don't know that!"

"You forget I was a champion in college, Bastelle. Besides, I am aware that my presence would help get publicity for the tournament and the new fightsense technology they are going to implement if that is what you were going to reveal to me," Pinz said, rolling her

eyes. "However, you and a lot of people who share your concerns will be surprised when I actually—"

"It's not just about the publicity, Pinz," Bastelle said solemnly. "It's about diverting attention from certain things."

"What do you mean?" Pinz asked, confused.

Bastelle took another sip and reached into her purse to bring out her holophone. After a series of taps, she projected its screen in midair. A mail from an anonymous sender was on display.

"The original tournament sponsor, Orshim Weller, was murdered two months ago, Pinz," Bastelle explained as Pinz skimmed through the mail. "Nobody quite remembers that because that was around the time you received your invitation. The Karomozian media became obsessed with news of your participation, and everybody forgot about the murder. These new sponsors, no one is quite sure who exactly they are, and frankly, no one really cares now."

Pinz opened her mouth to speak, but Bastelle continued. "That's not all," Bastelle said as she flipped through a series of mails. "Last year, one of the fighters mysteriously disappeared after the tournament and another never showed up — a third took up permanent residence on Karomoz despite his family's pleas to return and despite the fact that he had bought a return ticket beforehand. A fourth later came in the news for breaking into an art museum on Karomoz. She started a fight with the guards, all the while distracting them from a grand theft of paintings going on simultaneously." Bastelle paused for a moment as if to let it all sink in. "There is something sinister about this tournament, Pinz, and I fear you may put yourself in danger by going there."

Pinz frowned in consternation. "Wait, how do you know all this? I didn't find anything of the sort on the net. Where did you receive those mails from?" Pinz asked curiously.

Bastelle gave a smug smile. "I am a media person, Pinz, and I have sources even on other planets. I ran profiles on the participants last year. But then I know all this also because" —

Bastelle took another sip and set down the empty glass on the table — "I invested in the tournament. Certain things are only divulged to investors."

That took Pinz by surprise. "Invested in it? You? But why?"

Bastelle opened her mouth but hesitated.

"I can't believe this. You invested in it just so you could find some dirt to stop me from going? Just so you could cast me in your next..." Pinz was at a loss for words. "I mean, are you serious?"

"No, Pinz, that's not—"

"I have had it. You have gone too far," Pinz yelled, standing up, grabbing Puff in her arms. "I can't even tell if you are making all that up. Even if it is true, it doesn't mean anything except that you are a sick creep. Goodbye."

Pinz stomped out of the gazebo, ignoring Bastelle's cries of protest.

She headed straight out toward the exit and phoned Seluna on the way to tell her they were leaving for the spaceport. Outside, they once again got in her car and drove away.

They traveled in silence until they arrived at the spaceport, where Pinz was whisked away to the VIP waiting lounge. She was about to pass through the gates when her holophone rang. As soon as she attended the call, the assistant director's voice rang out, "Ms. Ailoraw? Where are you?"

"At the spaceport. About to board. Why?"

"Bastelle... she is dead!"

"What?!" Pinz shouted in shock.

"What happened?" Seluna asked, behind her.

The assistant director continued frantically, "They're saying she was probably poisoned. Please, you need to come back." With that, the line hung up.

"What happened?" Seluna asked again.

"Bastelle's dead." Pinz's lips quivered as she spoke. "We need to go back."

"Oh, no!" Seluna's eyes widened as she put her hand to her mouth.

"We need to go back," Pinz repeated. She stepped back from the counter.

"OK, OK, you need to think, Pinz," Seluna insisted, grabbing Pinz from her shoulders. "This is awful, but we will miss the voyage, and we will miss the registration deadline."

"Yes, but—" Pinz protested.

"You were last seen yelling at her, Pinz. Even if the spaceport authorities allow us to go back, you will get stuck in a deep mess if you do. They will try to pin this on you. Let them sort this out. For now, we go." Seluna looked straight into Pinz's eyes.

If what Bastelle said was true, I will be in a mess, either way, Pinz thought fearfully. She hesitated for a moment, wondering what the right thing to do would be. They can't hurt me now that I know, she finally resolved and stepped through the gates.

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!