

Chapter XIV - Grudge Match

"I would like to try it first," Seluna declared obstinately.

"This is not a plaything," Mert replied, his voice reverberating through the room. The heavily built man towered over Seluna and had a square, clean-shaven face, an amiable smile, and neatly combed, wavy, brown hair.

"Which is why I want to try it before Ms. Ailoraw does," Seluna said.

"Has there been some misunderstanding?" Mert asked with a concerned air. "Do you suspect it might harm her?"

Two-faced jerk, Pinz thought, as she caressed Puff in her arms. She would have blurted outright at his face about Bastelle's death and what she had told her. But Seluna had advised her to play along with the act for now. It was all she could do to keep her lips pursed. I can still be an absolute jerk about it, though, Pinz thought.

Pinz shrugged. "I'm sure you would forgive me if I feel the need to be prepared for the effects, if any, so that I don't make a fool of myself in front of my fans."

She looked around at the camera lenses fixed into the metal walls of the testing area. She had been informed that the demonstration of the new fightsense technology would be screened at the foyer of Hotel Grande and several other places as part of the Galactic Battle Fighting Tournament promotion. That gave her much solace. Surely, they would not dare cause harm to her with so many people watching?

Behind Pinz was a large glass partition that separated the testing area from the monitoring area, where personnel sat behind screens and peered through the glass into the testing area. Before Pinz had crossed the partition, she had heard all sorts of digital noises, from text scrawling over screens to the beeping of the electronic gadgets, but now when she stood on the other side, not a single sound came from the monitoring area.

Mert nodded. "Very well. If you would please step up, Ms. Artis?" he said to Seluna.

Seluna descended a couple of short steps onto the metal floor below. Her footsteps echoed through the silence as she approached the center of the room. Two personnel got to fitting Seluna up with the fightsense gadget, which consisted of a black, fingerless gauntlet and a small earpiece.

Facing Seluna was another man who was already geared up. He had been introduced to Pinz as Utsu, from planet Digitex, a fellow fighter in the tournament. Lean, with spiky, black hair, he was the champion of the GB tournament held two years ago.

Puff gently slapped Pinz with her little paw to reclaim her attention and to show her displeasure at being confined within the walls with these strange people. Pinz stroked the cat's head and chin to ease her restlessness. Even she is uncomfortable, Pinz thought.

When they were done, the personnel climbed the steps to the raised edge of the area and crossed the glass partition back to the monitoring area.

Mert spoke into his headset, "Fire it up."

Pinz watched through the partition behind her as one of the personnel tapped away into a keyboard before him. She turned back to glance at Seluna. All at once, a layer of turquoise light flooded the floor and enveloped all four walls while a turquoise aura emanated from Seluna and Utsu. Seluna gasped in amazement and gawked at each of her arms one by one, turning and twisting her limbs.

Two holograms materialized overhead, one over Seluna, one over Utsu. They displayed health bars with the respective names, akin to the ones Pinz had seen in video games she had played as a kid.

"Behold the revolutionary fightsense technology that will but redefine... fighting," Mert announced triumphantly, his face awash in the turquoise glow.

"Which, apparently, lets you fight on a funky disco floor?" Pinz said, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, that is an added bonus, I admit." Mert chuckled. "But allow me to demonstrate its real power. Ms. Artis, if you will, would you strike Utsu as hard as you can?"

"I suppose he will block my blow and throw me to the ground?" Seluna asked uncertainly.

"No, he won't do a thing," Utsu chimed in. "I will take your blow with full force."

"Oh," Seluna exclaimed.

She pulled up her fists and gingerly moved toward Utsu while the latter stood straight, his chest puffed out, arms folded behind his back.

Pinz watched in consternation as Seluna pulled her fist back and then smacked Utsu's face with all her might. Utsu grimaced a little as the turquoise aura briefly pulsated at the point of impact along with a 'bop' noise. Above him, a bit of red crept into Utsu's turquoise health bar indicating the damage he had taken.

"Did it not hurt? Not even a bit?" Pinz asked Utsu.

"Ah, a funny vibration in my head, but other than that, no." Utsu shrugged.

Without warning, Utsu brutally socked Seluna in the face. Pinz jumped in shock, and a shriek escaped her mouth. Seluna's life bar turned completely red as yet another hologram materialized in midair, displaying the words, Fighter One Wins.

"You should have told me before doing that!" Seluna said indignantly.

"My apologies, ma'am," Utsu said, bowing.

Mert cleared his throat. "We here at Galactic Enterprises have always found fighting a bit too... savage, shall we say? Kicking and punching and generally beating your opponent into an oozing mess of enertrons just for sport... it's something that should be best left in the past." The way he spoke, as if in a trance, he might as well have been talking to himself. "The fightsense gear and the fightsense arena shroud the combatants and the battlefield in a polarized force field. The gear also accurately analyzes the combatants' skills and physical conditioning. It tracks the force applied by the attacking combatant in each blow and the endurance of the defending combatant to calculate the damage caused... all the while protecting the combatants from real pain or injury. Even throwing the opponent down onto the floor and knocking them into walls will not hurt them."

Despite herself, Pinz found herself marveling at what she was hearing. Technology designed to eliminate pain from a sport had to be something good. But then, she remembered that Bastelle was dead. Are these people really involved with that? Pinz wondered. "What about twisting your opponent's joints?" she asked.

"The force will be applied, and the joint will be immobilized, but again, the force field will not allow it to be twisted to the point of pain. But since the gear analyzes everything, including endurance, it will automatically cause the defending fighter to lose due to submission if its calculations show that the fighter would have given up had they felt the pain," Mert explained.

"That's... amazing," Pinz whispered.

"Isn't it? So, are you ready? Your fans are waiting up there for your fight. Shall we?"

"Let's!" Pinz replied.

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"How long do you suppose we have to wait?" Heraclark asked as he lay on the floor, staring at the passageway ceiling.

"We will leave the hotel when that actress of yours does, along with her fans," Jayrock replied, slumped against a wall.

"But, I need to get my blueprints."

"What is in those darned blueprints?" Jayrock asked, annoyed.

"Some... some technology that is to be used in that fighting tournament."

Jayrock gazed at Heraclark, perplexed. "Your father invented something to be used in the tournament? Years after his death?"

"Of course, he didn't, you fool," Heraclark snapped. "They want to use whatever he invented in the tournament."

"Oh," said Jayrock.

Neither of them said anything for a while. "Tell me," Jayrock finally broke the silence. "How did you know I would still be in our room?"

"I didn't," Heraclark said wistfully. "I just took a risk."

"Well, you were lucky," Jayrock said. "I did leave the room. I was headed for the bank in one of those glass elevators when I glimpsed you walking along with these men on one of the floors. Something told me you were in danger."

"How did you know I would go to the room?" Heraclark rolled on his side to face Jayrock.

"I went back up and watched from the railings where you'd go. You boarded one of the elevators, but you started coming up instead of going down. That's when I knew you were coming to the room."

"Ah, I see," Heraclark said as he rolled back. "Thank you."

"You owe me one."

"Excuse me?" Heraclark sat up straight. "I saved you from the lake! And didn't tell anyone!"

"Oh, that. Yeah, OK, we're even," Jayrock conceded. After a bit, he added, "Do you have a mother waiting for you at home?"

"Yes. Why?" Heraclark asked, frowning.

"Then don't put yourself in danger. Don't be so reckless."

"Ah, that again," Heraclark snorted. "I'm just going to say, if you'd lost your father, you'd understand."

"My parents died in an accident when I was a baby. I never really knew them." Jayrock watched as Heraclark's face softened while he thought of something to say. "But yes, I can't even imagine what it would be like experiencing... what you experienced."

Heraclark sighed. "You know I hate my job. I only chose it after my father died because he always wanted me to be a bank manager when I grew up. That too at the Bank of Loogmor. Until now, I never knew why—"

A bloodcurdling scream of a girl drowned out Heraclark's words and echoed through the passageway, sending shivers down Jayrock's spine.

The screaming continued for a painfully long time, making Heraclark cover his ears. Whoever it was, was clearly in extreme agony. Then, suddenly, it died down. They sat stunned for a moment, staring at the double doors ahead.

"What in the galaxy..." Heraclark swallowed a lump in his throat.

Jayrock cautiously got up. "There's somebody on the other side."

"Umm... are you really this stupid? Or do you purposefully try to get on people's nerves?" Heraclark said.

"I mean..." Jayrock said, trying to find something to cover up. That's how Gylith must have felt all the time. "Ah, forget it."

They silently approached the double doors. Jayrock pressed his ears against them and listened. "Nothing," he said.

Heraclark created a pair of swirling dark-orchid orbs that spread out and engulfed them both.

"What are you doing? I can't see," Jayrock protested.

"Yeah. But I can hear better," Heraclark said and pressed his ear against the doors. His eyes popped out as he heard the sounds of someone getting a savage beating. "She is being beaten up. We need to do something."

"Remove this stupid smoke first," Jayrock said.

Heraclark absorbed the mist back into his hands. "We need to hack that," Heraclark said, eyeing the keypad next to the doors.

"And by that, we mean busting it with a club?" Jayrock asked skeptically.

Heraclark hunched over the keypad and examined it. "I have experience with all sorts of locks. That one required a club — this one requires more... tact."

Heraclark formed wispy mist on his hands again and grabbed the frame of the keypad. The mist spread onto the frame and enveloped it. He then yanked on it and pulled it apart from the wall.

"That was tact?" Jayrock said.

Heraclark did not reply as he let the keypad drop to the ground. He got to work on the tangle of wires exposed underneath. He had had experience with these kinds of circuits

when he oversaw maintenance at the Bank of Loogmor. This one was much less complex than the ones over there.

Suddenly, something or somebody slammed hard into the double doors with a deafening clang that rang through the corridor.

Heraclark balked. "Is it such a good idea to get involved with this?"

"You were the one who said we need to do something! Now, hurry!" Jayrock cried.

Heraclark frantically worked on the wires, trying to get the right ones connected. Finally, the doors disengaged and silently slid apart.

Jayrock squinted in confusion at what he saw through the gap. A translucent, turquoise wall, seemingly made of pulsating light, lined the entrance. Through that, he could only vaguely make out a spacious room of some sort.

Heraclark poked his hand through the turquoise wall. He felt a tingling in his fingers, palm, and wrist as they passed through, but there was no resistance.

"Wait," Jayrock said as Heraclark stepped forward, but he passed through the light into the room anyway. He gasped as he looked around the place, which seemed to be made of the same turquoise light. He could see people peering back at him through the light wall ahead. Strangely, despite all the light walls and floor, the room was still... dark. He felt his senses heightening. He heard footsteps behind him as Jayrock entered in.

And then he felt another presence... something ominous. He abruptly turned to his left, and his eye caught another glow... in the shape of a mer... a mer with twin pigtails... in the shape of Pinz Ailoraw.

She had her back to them. A body lay at her feet, its clothes ripped apart, and malachite-green enertrons oozed out. Dark-orange claws extended from Pinz's fingers.

"Pinz Ailoraw?" Heraclark called out.

She turned around in a flash and stared at Heraclark with such ferocity in her bright-green eyes that it made him instinctively step back and regret calling out to her. She wore the traditional outfit of female practitioners of the athletic yet stealthy Felitte Ubuckiff — a sleeveless, red tunic with white trimming and accents along with thigh-length, navy stockings and red boots, shin guards, and arm guards.

"I thought she was the one getting beaten up," Jayrock exclaimed in shock. "Is she always this mad?"

What an infuriating pair of jerks! I should kill them! A dark-orange burst of energy flashed beneath Pinz's soles, sending her hurtling high up into the air.

What the? Heraclark thought just as Pinz came crashing down. Her heel slammed into his face, which sent searing pain up his already hurting nose. Clutching at his face, he violently stumbled back and lost balance as the floor came up to meet the back of his head.

Pinz swiped her claw, leaving a dark-orange trail, at Jayrock, who formed an amethyst shield to block it, but then she unleashed a pair of chartreuse optic beams from her eyes that went right through the translucent shield and singed Jayrock's arm.

Letting out a grunt, she went in for the kill and stabbed at Jayrock's face, but Jayrock formed deep-saffron rock on both his hands and grabbed her hand to keep it away from himself. She stabbed with her other hand, so Jayrock freed one of his hands and held her other hand as well.

It was taking all his strength to keep her at bay while she growled and struggled, trying to wrench her hands free.

How dare he?! Insufferable fool!

A foot caught Jayrock's chin with such jarring force that it sent his teeth snapping together, and his tongue got bit. His grip faltered before another foot to his face knocked him down to the floor.

Pinz rushed toward him and aimed for his eyes with both her claws. He closed his eyes in terror, but then he heard her grunting wildly. He opened his eyes to see the claws hanging just inches above his eyes. Smoky tentacles were wrapped around her wrists, pulling her away from him.

Has she gone mad? Heraclark thought as he gave the tentacles a sudden pull before Pinz lost her balance and half-stumbled, half-dragged over toward him. He leaped into the air and twisted around to drop kick her hard before landing on his hands. The Loogmort Krokknig he had learned from action movies may be all about swank, but it still hit hard.

Jayrock, still on the floor, stamped his foot. A series of rocks jutted out of the ground and progressed forward until one struck the stumbling Pinz in her back.

Pinz fell splat on her face. In that moment of refuge, Heraclark looked to his right through the translucent, turquoise wall. The people beyond sat watching with flat faces, making it all feel like a sick cage match. A lone, tall man stood stroking his chin, staring intently. "Why aren't you doing anything?!" Heraclark cried angrily. "Come and help us!"

He watched as one of them looked up at the tall man as if waiting for his approval, but the man only held out his hand.

Something orange suddenly bounded out from somewhere beneath the consoles on the other side. Heraclark caught sight of it long enough to realize it was a cat before it jumped up and disappeared into a vent set low in a wall. Is it that annoying cat of hers? Heraclark wondered.

"Let's restrain her," Jayrock said and grabbed Pinz's arms, bringing them together behind her.

As he began forming rock on her hands to bind them together, her forearms began flashing with dark-orange tiger stripes. To his horror, she effortlessly broke the rock away and rolled onto her back. Her arms still flashing with tiger stripes, she drove her palm into his chest. A massive paw print formed and exploded at the point of impact, sending Jayrock flying into one of the light walls — only it felt and sounded like metal as Jayrock's back smashed into it. He sank to the floor, groaning in pain.

As Pinz sprang up from the floor, Heraclark shot tentacles at her once more, which began wrapping around her. However, this time, she grabbed the smoky appendages. The next thing Heraclark knew was being lifted off the ground and catapulting through the air, his own tentacles pulling at him. Pinz swung him around once before the partition rushed to meet his face with a crunch. His senses knocked out of him, he fell to the floor like a brick.

The body lay motionless, and there was a scanty bubbling of enertrons. It was a man with tangled black hair and clothes ripped in places. Something small, black, and broken lay next to the body. Jayrock crawled over on his hands and knees to get a closer look. It was fragmented, so it was hard to figure out what it was, but it looked like an earpiece. On one of the pieces, Jayrock could make out the word 'sense.'

Jayrock looked up above. At the far end, Pinz Ailoraw moved menacingly toward Heraclark, who lay slumped against the wall between them and the creepy people in lab coats on the other side. She is wearing the same gadget, Jayrock realized. Even the glove thing. On the right hand, Pinz and the man on the floor were wearing a black metal glove of some sort.

Heraclark barely dodged out of the way as Pinz tore out his tuxedo with her claws. He then rushed her, lifting her off the floor on his shoulders, and slammed her into the opposite wall.

Pinz retracted her claws, and a pair of dark-orange feline jaws formed around Pinz's fingers and thumbs. She snapped the jaws shut on Heraclark's shoulders, who yelped in pain. Then she vaulted over his head onto the other side.

Jayrock stood waiting and lunged at Pinz with a spinning ax kick covered in rock. Pinz pulled Heraclark from behind her and held him in the way, disrupting Jayrock's kick.

Heraclark turned around with a sudden backhand that connected with Pinz's jaw, making her shriek in pain. He grabbed her head and started channeling scarlet shadow force into her that threatened to overload her. She writhed and struggled, trying to break free.

Jayrock rushed to her back, pulled her arms together, and once again attempted to bind her hands with rock. It's working, he thought in triumph as he watched the rock grow.

Pinz's eyes glowed chartreuse, and a pair of moonbeams burned and nearly blinded Heraclark, who let go. She then thrust her hands upward and smashed the rock onto Jayrock's chin, followed by an elbow to his chest that knocked him back to the wall.

She then burst into a flurry of lightning-fast punches at Heraclark before swiping the floor with a low kick that tripped him up and sent him crashing to the floor.

Why won't they just rid me of themselves and die?!

Pinz looked back and forth at Jayrock and Heraclark as if to choose whom to finish first. Tiger stripes flashed on her arms as she grabbed Heraclark by his hair and dragged him toward Jayrock. She grabbed the latter's hair too and pulled both of their heads in opposition, ready to bang them together.

Jayrock's world swirled as he felt his head being pulled back, ever so slightly. He formed rock on his face — Heraclark would probably be knocked out, but at least he would be protected. Without warning, his head rushed forward toward Heraclark's.

Heraclark felt his head stop with a jerk, just inches from Jayrock's. Somewhere, he heard a scratching noise. He felt the grip on his hair loosen, so he turned to the source of the sound. A loud meow assailed his ears. Through the fog that was his vision, he scanned the turquoise wall from which the sounds seemed to emanate.

As the meowing continued, now much more frantically, echoing through the silence that had fallen, Heraclark spotted a pair of lime-green eyes and a little, ginger face peering through the translucent light wall. Why doesn't it cross it? Heraclark wondered in a daze. And then he noticed some bars, faintly visible through the wall, obstructing the cat's way. She is inside a vent, Heraclark realized.

Pinz stood staring at the cat in confusion and what seemed to be... fear. She trembled as her face contorted through a gamut of expressions, still loosely holding onto their hair. Heraclark released shadow tentacles, wrapping them around the bars, and pulled with all his might.

A few seconds later, the bars ripped out of their place and fell into the room with a clang. The cat bounded out of the vent opening and into the room. She scampered straight over to Pinz and rubbed against her legs.

Pinz seemed to balk for a moment. But just as soon as that, claws extended from her fingers, and she took a swipe at the cat. It jumped in surprise, narrowly avoiding the assault.

Pinz seemed ready for the next attack but again hesitated as if trying to resist her impulses. Now is the moment, Jayrock decided. Rising from his hands and knees, Jayrock planted a hook kick into Pinz's abdomen. She bent over, clutching her stomach.

Jayrock made a grab for the black earpiece she was wearing, snatched it away, and crushed it in his rock-covered fist. The turquoise aura around Pinz vanished instantly.

Oh, my goodness, my head! Pinz clutched her head and collapsed. Heraclark rose instinctively and grabbed her from the armpits to keep her from falling.

Puff made a leap, climbed on Pinz's shoulder, and proceeded to bunt her head against Pinz's.

"You're safe!" Pinz moaned weakly. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Puff. You saved me!"

"So did we," Jayrock declared.

"Who are you?" Pinz asked, scrunching up her nose. The guy addressing her had a neat, square face with twinkling brown eyes and short, neatly cut but tousled brown hair.

"I am Heraclark Scotnyx," Heraclark replied before Jayrock could.

It was then that Pinz noticed she was being held by someone. She applied weight onto her legs and pushed the hands under her armpits away. Every bone in her cried out in pain as she did so, but she resolved to stand on her own. She turned around to face the man behind her. The spikes in his blue-black hair were disrupted where she had grabbed them. He had a pale complexion with an oblong, muscular face and deep-blue eyes.

"I am Pinz Ailoraw," she said.

I know, Heraclark thought. Suddenly, the turquoise walls around them dissolved and vanished into thin air. The floor changed from turquoise light to sheets of metal. Heraclark could now see that a glass partition ahead separated them from the passive spectators on the other side.

"Who are you people?!" Heraclark cried angrily, marching toward the glass. "Come over here! I just wanna talk!"

"What do you want from me?!" Pinz yelled. "You people killed Bastelle, didn't you? I want to know why!" Puff joined in with a hiss and a spat.

On the other end, the tall man removed his hand from his chin and waved his index finger in the air in a circular motion. One of the personnel got up and went out of the room through the door on the far side.

"Pebble Revolver!" Jayrock cried.

The machine gun materialized in his hands. He let loose a spiraling barrage of pebbles at the glass partition.

Heraclark jumped as the pebbles shot past him, smashing relentlessly into the glass. When Jayrock removed his finger from the trigger, only a few faint cracks marred the wall.

"Figures." Jayrock shrugged.

Heraclark heaved against the small door set in the partition, but it did not budge even a little.

The door on the far side of the monitoring area opened. Pinz's eyes bulged out in horror as she saw Seluna being brought in at gunpoint by two men. Seluna trembled as she limped toward Mert, and all the color was blanched from her face.

They heard some static around them before Mert's voice boomed through overhead speakers, "Pinz Ailoraw! We will let you in, to our side, in a moment. You must come over — alone — or your friend will suffer the consequences."

"No," Pinz gasped, covering her mouth.

"Shadow Tagger!" Heraclark cried, followed by the cannon materializing in his hand.

"No, don't!" Pinz said, putting a hand on Heraclark's shoulder. "That's my friend. I can't risk it. I have to go."

"They're bluffing," Heraclark protested.

"Let her go," Jayrock interjected. He turned to Pinz. "You go save your friend, whatever it takes. Don't let her die."

Pinz nodded. "Thank you!"

"So, all this was for nothing? She just goes back?" Heraclark said incredulously.

"Yes. I go back," Pinz said resignedly. "But, thanks for everything."

She took in a deep breath and stepped in front of the door in the partition. Puff gathered herself into a ball in Pinz's arms. A woman on the other side tapped away on a screen. The door slid open, and Pinz stepped through. The door closed behind her.

"Pinz!" Seluna croaked through tears.

"Shh! It's OK. I'm here," Pinz assured her. "You realize you can't keep this up for long?" she said to Mert. "People will wonder what happened to me."

"Oh, we're counting on that," Mert replied. "Kash, if you'd play the footage?"

The woman who had opened the door tapped a thumbnail on a screen and dragged it until it filled the screen. A video started playing — Pinz saw herself standing in front of Utsu in the testing area. The look of pure rage — forehead furrowed, eyes narrowed, and teeth gnashing — on her own face sent shivers down her spine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is going to be one heck of a fight," a cheerful female voice announced. "My, my Pinz Ailoraw looks particularly agitated today. I hope y'all didn't bother her too much up in the foyer. Or does she have a personal score to settle with Utsu Hoshek?"

Life bars hovered over both of their heads, bearing their names and turquoise light outlined them. For a brief moment, a word flashed in midair — 'fight!'.

"Aaaand, fight!" the voice chirped.

Pinz recoiled in shock as she saw herself spring out claws and charge at Utsu like a wounded lion. She swiped left, right, and center as Utsu cowered behind her attacks.

"What is Pinz Ailoraw doing?" the voice exclaimed in feigned shock. "She is using her feline powers! That is illegal!"

She managed to break his earpiece, after which the aura around him disappeared. She proceeded to tear out pieces of Utsu's clothing and skin alike until he was a mess of malachite-green enertrons.

"She destroyed the fightsense gadget! Utsu's forcefield is gone, and he is feeling all the pain right now. Why is Pinz Ailoraw doing this?! What is wrong with her lately?!"

She watched herself grab him from the shoulders, drop to the floor on her back, and thrust her feet into his gut. Then, she rolled backward and kicked out with her feet so that Utsu went flying over her head and slammed into the double doors hidden behind the turquoise light wall.

"Oh, my! Ms. Ailoraw! Please, stop this wanton violence! Somebody stop her!"

She continued savaging Utsu for quite a while, thrashing him around like a cat with a ball of thread.

Then the double doors opened, and Heraclark and the brown-haired guy came running inside.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for this shocking behavior on Ms. Ailoraw's part. Right now, we need to go off air." The video stopped abruptly.

Mert looked at Pinz and gave one of his charming smiles as if there was nothing wrong at all with what she had just seen.

"The people in the foyer upstairs saw all that." Mert's words pounded in Pinz's head. "They also know you were seen having a row with your director before she died. You have been a naughty girl, Pinz Ailoraw, and your fans are starting to have doubts about you."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Pinz demanded. "What have I done to you?"

"Oh, it's nothing personal. Just for our gains, really." Mert grinned. "We'll explain it to you in detail. Now, if you'd please follow us. We have somewhere to go."

I should have listened to Bastelle, Pinz thought. Oh, I am so stupid.

Heraclark watched through the glass, helpless, as they took Pinz through the door on the other side. They had the other girl still at gunpoint.

When they were gone, Heraclark infused his fist with a crackling, scarlet shadow and pounded on the glass sliding door. It did not even crack.

"We have to go back through there," Jayrock said, pointing toward the open double doors at the back.

Suddenly, they heard a moan. Jayrock turned sharply to his left. He had forgotten all about the body in the room, he realized.

He moved slowly toward the man on the floor with the spiky, black hair. There was a brief movement and then another moan.

Jayrock knelt over him and flipped him over. The face was battered, smeared with enertrons in wounds. "Hey! Can you hear me?"

Jayrock formed rock over any wounds he could find to stop the enertrons from leaking.

"How on Loogmor did he survive? Is he alright?" Heraclark asked, kneeling beside Jayrock.

"My chest and jaw and tongue still hurt like crazy. What do you think he must be feeling?" Jayrock replied. "Could you make a tourniquet around this leg?"

"My nose hurts too," Heraclark said as he wrapped a tendril tightly around the man's left leg, which still seemed to be oozing enertrons.

"Water," the man croaked.

Jayrock and Heraclark looked at each other awkwardly.

"Let's take him up," Heraclark said, grabbing the man from his arm.

"All the way up the stairs?" Jayrock asked incredulously. "Up where we are wanted?"

"We can't leave him here, can we?"

"Oh, alright," Jayrock resigned and slumped the man's other arm over his shoulder.

The man winced as they supported him up. "I can open that door," he muttered. "The glass one."

"Can you?" Jayrock asked eagerly.

"Get me close," the man groaned.

They half-carried, half-dragged him over to the door.

"You are very fortunate you survived," Jayrock said. "You must not have lost as many enertrons as it seemed. You probably had a concussion."

"Lucky, I am not! Put me down now," the man said.

They gently lowered him to the floor and sat him up. He placed his palms on the floor. A malachite-green and turquoise-blue circuit grid swept across the floor and passed under the door.

"Oh, you're Digitch?" Heraclark exclaimed. "What's your name?"

"Utsu," said Utsu.

They saw the circuit grid crawl up the consoles on the other side until it reached the button for opening the glass door. After a beep, the door slid out of their way.

"Move it," Utsu said, almost commanded.

They picked him up again and dragged him through the door. The screens around were turned off now, but they could still hear faint, beeping noises.

"Who are these people? Where do you think they took Pinz Ailoraw?" Heraclark asked.

"They are Galactic Enterprises, a promotion company," Utsu explained wearily. "They were working along with Orshim Weller, the former sponsor of the Galactic Battle fighting tournament, for a year."

"Former sponsor?" Jayrock inquired as they opened the door on the far end of the room.

"Murdered two months ago... then these people completely took over the sponsorship."

They stepped out onto a railed, semicircular catwalk transitioning into staircases on either end. Below was a circular area, the center of which was lined with a low glass wall with desks and plush, swivel chairs inside. The circular walls of the space were maroon marble

inscribed with the logo of Galactic Enterprises. At the far end was another catwalk where a pair of elevator doors was located.

Jayrock spotted a water dispenser down below and left Utsu's side to descend the stairs.

"How were you dragged into all this?" Heraclark asked as he supported Utsu along the catwalk toward the stairs.

"Let me have some dang water first," Utsu said.

As Heraclark led Utsu down the stairs, Jayrock approached them and held a disposable cup of water to Utsu's mouth. He gulped it in seconds.

"More," he croaked.

He drank up two more cups of water. "I was promised 3000 Karomozian learts to take part in the demonstration of this darned technology," Utsu said when he was done. "I did not sign up to be almost killed."

"That brings me to my previous question — where do you think they took Pinz Ailoraw?" Heraclark asked.

As Jayrock threw the cup into a trash can, he noticed an intercom on the low glass wall above a desk. A sign said, 'In case of emergency call' with several three-digit numbers written underneath.

"Right now?" Utsu was saying. "Probably to the roof of this dang hotel in one of their helicopters."

"Where to?" Heraclark asked.

"That I don't know."

"Let's get you some medical attention," Jayrock said as he dialed the number for a medical emergency on the intercom.

"Thank you," Utsu replied.

"Could you make a guess at where they might take her next?" Heraclark asked while Jayrock talked on the intercom.

Utsu considered Heraclark for a moment. "No," he said flatly.

After a few curt exchanges, Jayrock hung up. "The medic is on her way."

Jayrock returned to Utsu's side, and they helped him up another set of stairs onto the other catwalk. They stopped in front of the elevators and waited for quite a while. Eventually, they heard a soft whirring as one of the elevators set in motion.

"Finally," Heraclark exhaled.

In a moment, the elevator door opened.

Jayrock saw half a dozen glinting barrels trained their way before a hail of red energy bolts assaulted them. A bolt found its way into Utsu's shoulder, and he winced in pain.

Jayrock stamped his foot on the ground and erected a rock wall in front of the three of them.

"Crag Carbine!" cried Jayrock.

"Dark Matter!" cried Heraclark.

A deep-saffron and amethyst rifle with a pointed muzzle materialized in Jayrock's hands. A dark-orchid and scarlet ray gun with a large projector emerged in Heraclark's.

As Heraclark blindly pulled the trigger, a thick, wavy dark-orchid beam coursed right through the rock wall. He shot a couple more times, hoping to get someone on the other end.

The gunfire from the other end slowly chipped away at the rock wall. Jayrock pulled the trigger. A rock shaped like a torpedo blasted out and exploded into a burst of sand on contact. The wall crumbled away with bits and pieces, smashing into the men on the other end.

Jayrock fired another shot, taking down one of them. The rest coughed and shielded their eyes from the sand bursting forth.

Heraclark tried to move back down the stairs to put some distance between him and the assailants and look for some cover.

From the corner of his eyes, he noticed Utsu staggering back toward the railing of the catwalk, clutching his shoulder, and flipping over to fall down on the floor below. He landed with a thud.

Not good, Heraclark feared.

Suddenly, he noticed how one of the men firing at them looked familiar. He's Rook's man! he recalled. Heraclark remembered him taking him to his room at gunpoint with Umberton's men.

"Hey! Hey! Look over here!" Heraclark called out. "Doesn't that hag want the blueprints? Well, if she does, you better stop shooting and put down your guns!"

The man regarded Heraclark for a moment and then fired — the bolt sailed past Heraclark's ear. He lost his balance and tumbled down the stairs leading down from the catwalk.

Dazed, he heard a voice from above, "She has them, fool! Now, she wants you dead."

...

Pinz felt goosebumps forming on her skin as her Felitte Ubuckiff costume flapped in the chilly wind. The sky was turning deep blue from black while in the east, hints of pinks and oranges had begun creeping in.

The surrounding city seemed alive even at this hour with skyscrapers rising all around them from the abyss below, their windows aglow like a million fireflies dotted with the odd red glow from aviation lights. Raptors and pigeons circled overhead, screeching and cooing.

They stood on the concrete roof before a pair of enormous helipads, bordered by blinking red lights. Two white helicopters with blue accents stood waiting.

Puff's breathing was shallow and rapid, and her fur was raised on end. I should have left her behind with those two, Pinz thought as she caressed Puff's back. She feared they might use her as leverage as well.

Seluna shivered in the wind as she gathered her arms about her. The man behind her was no longer pointing his gun at her, but he still clearly brandished it.

"We have waited long enough," Mert spoke up. "Let's start moving." He clapped his hands. "Rook, take Mr. Umberton and the girl with you to the arena," he said, motioning toward Seluna. This was apparently addressed to a woman with a short haircut who had joined them a while ago. "I will be right behind with Pinz Ailoraw."

"They'd better be dead before we reach there," the woman insisted, looking into Mert's eyes.

"Please, let Seluna be with me," Pinz begged as they led Seluna into one of the helicopters.

"It's for your own good," Mert said cryptically.

"For my own good?"

"Yes. You might try something heroic if you two are in the same chopper. Then, we will really need to kill her... and possibly you... and your cat."

Pinz hugged Puff tightly as she watched Seluna step up the ramp and inside the helicopter. She stole a mournful glance at Pinz one last time before she disappeared. Several other people followed along with the old woman and another man with greasy, black hair. Once everybody got in, the helicopter's blades whirred to life, kicking up even more wind. Soon, it began to ascend.

"Alright, everybody, move!" Mert commanded. "This way, Ms. Ailoraw."

They set for the other helicopter, and Pinz climbed up the steps of the helipad. Her feet clanged against the grating as she made her way to the helicopter door that had opened into a ramp. She made her way inside.

The interior was dimly lit with warm overhead lights mixed with the green glow coming from the cockpit. There were two rows of three seats facing each other, with a small table in between. Pinz settled in the seat farthest to the left and strapped herself and Puff in. Mert sat down next to her, followed by a couple more people in lab coats. The door closed.

Finally, the engines revved up, and Pinz heard the chopping noise of the rotor blades. Her stomach felt funny as they began to ascend. She looked out the window, watching the helipad recede further and further.

Something smashed into the windshield, and Pinz heard it shattering. The helicopter spun out of control and hurtled downward. Pinz threw her arms around Puff as tightly as she could and closed her eyes, bracing for impact.

As the aircraft struck the ground, the sudden jolt knocked the air out of her lungs. Puff would have flown out of her grasp had the cat not been digging into her clothes. The helicopter skidded noisily for a distance and then stopped.

Mert unstrapped himself and rushed to the cockpit. Pinz unstrapped herself as well and turned around to look over her seat toward the cockpit. The pilot remained lifeless as Mert shook him and shouted into his ear. Amaranth enertrons gushed from his face like a geyser.

Mert flinched back as gunfire assailed the windshield. He unholstered his handgun from his waist and cautiously stepped toward the passenger door. Meanwhile, the two other people got up from their seats, produced their own guns, and flanked the entrance.

This is it! Pinz decided and rushed toward the cockpit.

"What are you trying to do?" Mert demanded angrily. He cursed under his breath as more gunfire pounded on the body of the helicopter. He slowly put up his hand and tapped at a touchpad next to the door, which opened up into a ramp.

Pinz snatched the gun at the pilot's waist and aimed it at the back of Mert's head.

An amaranth bolt zapped out when she pulled the trigger. A heartbeat later, Mert fell lifeless.

As the two other occupants aimed their weapons at Pinz, she shot one of them in the face. The other pulled the trigger... but misfired as Puff leaped in a rage and latched onto his face. She savaged his face amidst furious growls until he managed to throw her to the floor.

Another bolt left Pinz's gun, and he fell dead as well.

She was too shell-shocked to move for a moment just as her arms trembled violently. Finally, she let the gun drop to the ground.

"Puff, are you OK?" she asked urgently.

The cat purred as Pinz lifted her in her arms. She looked for any signs of injury, but thankfully, there were none. Just then, she realized she was standing in front of the open door of the helicopter. She looked outside and saw two familiar figures jogging toward her.

"What have you done?" Pinz demanded angrily as they drew near.

"We saved you!" Jayrock said in protest. Ingrate! he thought.

"They will kill my friend now!" Pinz yelled. "I need to get to her before they get to know about this," she said, looking at the dead men lying at her feet.

Jayrock and Heraclark exchanged a look.

"Where did they take her?" Heraclark asked.

"To the Brivil Arena, which I understand is a ten-hour drive from here," Pinz replied in despair.

"Who says we will drive?" Jayrock said as he stepped inside. "I have flown VTOL aircraft — I can certainly fly a slightly damaged chopper!"

"You will?" Pinz whispered, taken aback.

"Yes, but first, we need to get rid of the dead weight," Jayrock replied as he grabbed a dead man from his armpits and unceremoniously dumped him outside.

Hang in there, Seluna, Pinz thought as she kicked at Mert's flank. He went rolling lifelessly down the ramp. I'm coming.

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