

The Duke's encounter with the Ambassador had left him a bit shaken, but he refused to admit it, even to himself. Her Balanced Blade was a formidable match for his nanotech armor, and she was possibly the only person he'd ever seen more adaptable than he. The idea of voidborn humans had unsettled him. How did they survive? Why did they stay out there? The Duke had nearly gone mad when he was cast out from his homeworld, forced to remain adrift for years until he could find a safe port.

He waved all of this away, literally and figuratively. He had made it past the Garage of this ship, it was time to focus on getting through to the treasures that awaited him. Time to get to the next lay—AAAH!

The Duke fell through the doorway and found himself crashing upward through trees. He hadn't expected there to be no gravity. What had happened here?

He grabbed hold of a branch before clearing the top of the trees, fearful of being stuck floating with no way to move. He tried to swim through the air and barely made it to another tree. He decided to stay put until he could think of a plan. He let his nanotech armor grip bark through the soles of his feet. As he did so, a shadow loomed over him.

It looked to be twice his size, but that may have been a trick of the light. Duke Borna tensed his muscles and prepared for a fight, but as soon as he turned around, all he could think was, "Is this a giant cat?"

The figure was more than a foot taller than the Duke with large green eyes and larger ears. She stood on two legs and held onto the tree with her feet. She held her tail in her hands. The Duke regained his composure but kept a defensive stance to be safe. The cat-person pointed at herself and said, "Verbana."

The Duke was more at ease, but no less on guard. Was this Verbana friend or foe? He decided to find out with his boilerplate introduction. "I am Duke Borna, of House Chkung! Deposed but no less noble." When this elicited no response, he formed a small blade with his nanotech armor to show he meant business.

Verbana's eyes lit up, but with curiosity instead of fear. Duke Borna relaxed, finally understanding the motivation of his fellow traveler. He tentatively held out his other hand to show he meant no harm and directed the blade to dull and elongate. Verbana took a step forward, just as he'd anticipated.

"That's some snazzy tech, garooglio."

"I understand your tone, if not your words," the Duke replied. "Do you know how to get to the next level?"

She let go of her tail and stood at her full height. "I'll take you to it if I can get a closer look at your armor."

"Deal."

They pushed off the tree together and launched themselves through space. As they swirled through the air, rotating around each other, Duke Borna thought back to the grand balls he attended at his uncle's palace decades ago. All of his old dance partners were long dead, but now he was waltzing through the air with Verbana. She was making a detailed study of his nanotech where most people were enamored with his rings. He smiled sadly.

Verbana started talking about what brought her to the Wife of the Wizard and various stories she'd heard in her travels. The Duke gave her some of his nanites to study and to keep her warm. She looked cold.

Verbana pointed out the gate to the next layer. "It works with a weighted pad, which is useless in zero gravity, but I finally have a chance to try my idea," she said.

Before he could ask, "What's your idea?" she coiled her tail around his midsection and nimbly pulled herself to him. He grew suspicious. "What are you planning?" he demanded.

"This," Verbana said with a wink as they got close to the gate. With one fluid motion, she pushed herself off the Duke's belly and whipped him with her tail, giving her enough leverage to crash into the pad and activate the gate. She waved as she slipped through.

"Hmph," was all the Duke could mutter in response. He should've seen this coming, but he'd let his nostalgia get the better of him. Before he could get too far away, he grabbed a treetop and slowly made his way back to the gate. Thankfully, he had an idea that wouldn't rely on anyone else.

Because of the zero gravity, he nearly bounced off the pad when he tried to throw himself into it in a pale imitation of Verbana's gambit. On his third try making contact with it, he sent out his nanotech armor to latch onto it. Even without gravity, the nanites were able to pool at his feet. The armor stretched thin and he could feel parts of his chest and shoulders become exposed, but he could tell it was working. The nanites were pressing against the weighted pad!

As he slipped into the next layer of the ship, Duke Borna thought to himself, "This armor is the best investment I've ever made."