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# NPC No. 27: "Hello. Will you be joining the Neima & Co. security detail?"

Two days had passed since I had been paid for taking part in the recent territorial conflict between the houses of Count Rosello and Baroness Glient—a conflict that'd been sparked by a single painting.

As always, I found myself in front of Old Man Lohnes's counter at the Mercenaries Guild. I was shooting the breeze with him as I scrutinized the various jobs that were on offer.

"So, at the moment, the most common kind of work seems to be security details for merchant ship convoys."

"Yeah, it looks like the army and the police are so heated up about pirates that they've started to focus on hunting them. Wanted posters for pirates are steadily disappearing," he explained.

Lohnes looked weary somehow—he was probably worried about losing his own source of employment. It was only right and proper, though, that the army and the police would work to eliminate piracy.

The question remained—what had caused them to get so heated up? But there was really no point in wondering about that right now.

"In that case, why do the merchants need to hire bodyguards at all?" I asked.

"Well, it's not like the number of pirates has suddenly dropped to zero. Buying peace of mind with a little money is a totally respectable decision."

Lohnes showed me his monitor. It looked like he wanted me to search for work by myself.

"Well then, let me see if I can find anything that meets my conditions... Ah."

"What's up?" asked Lohnes. Today, he was holding a bottle of mineral water in one hand instead of his usual coffee.

"This job here," I said. "It's from the family of that marquess whose daughter was giving Mr. Hero preferential treatment. They want ten people this time."

I guessed that after Mr. Hero's sister had turned out to be a criminal, that family had terminated his exclusive contract with them.

"Since the one you call 'Mr. Hero' ended up in hot water, it looks like the marquess has made a proper request this time," said Old Man Lohnes. While he didn't explicitly state the reason, he was implying that he thought the same thing.

"I doubt anyone will accept a job from him, though," I commented.

After screwing over so many mercenaries last time, the marquess was going to have a hard time finding any takers.

Ignoring the request from that screwup of a noble, I scrolled through the rest of the job requests listed on the monitor. Eventually, my eyes fell on one job in particular.

"Oh," I began. "Here's a security job for a merchant convoy, and the application deadline is today... The recruitment quota is six people; there'll be a meeting tomorrow at 13:00 in meeting room number 53. The convoy departs at 9:00 a.m. two days after that meeting, and they just need one more person to make their quota of six? Yep. The fee is average, at least, so I guess I'll go with that one."

"Don't be late for that meeting," Lohnes warned.

This meeting the job ad had mentioned was a sort of planning discussion conducted by the guild for missions requiring small groups of mercenaries—missions just like this security detail for a merchant convoy.

In the past, such missions had been carried out in an off-the-cuff manner with no planning taking place until the day of departure. However, that had apparently resulted in too many mistakes and had caused too much trouble.

The fact that we wouldn't even be departing until two days after the meeting was a consideration to allow the client to start the recruitment process over again in the event that a disagreement arose during the meeting.

After completing the application procedure, I headed to the guild hangar to inspect my ship—the Patchwork—one last time ahead of the mission.

The next day, after an early breakfast, I went to the Mercenaries Guild again and quickly arrived at the area where the meeting rooms were located. There were one hundred and twenty meeting rooms here, and they could also serve as temporary shelters during times of emergency.

Ummm, which meeting room was it again...? Number 53... Here we go.

Incidentally, I had arrived ten minutes ahead of the scheduled meeting time. That was my trick to avoid being late.

I didn't think anyone else would have arrived yet, but I knocked before opening the door, just to be safe.

"Come in."

I was very surprised to hear a reply. I was so early that I really hadn't thought that anyone else would've arrived.

"Excuse me," I said, entering the room.

"Hello," a male voice said. "Will you be joining the Neima & Co. security detail?"

Once inside the meeting room, I was greeted by a young man—an obvious heartthrob—and a gorgeous girl with light green hair. The young man had greeted me with a breezy smile, but the pretty girl's expression seemed to say, How dare you barge in on us when I just managed to get him alone?

"Yeah, I certainly will," I replied. "Are you two involved in the mission as well?"

"Yes, though perhaps we can hold off on the introductions until everyone's arrived," said the young fellow.

After exchanging the minimum necessary pleasantries with the two early arrivals, I took the seat furthest away from them.

Another five minutes passed.

A man who looked far older than me—and who was probably even older than Old Man Lohnes—entered the room. "Oh, well, you're early. Thought I was late for a minute there."

"Hello. Will you be joining the Neima & Co. security detail?" said the handsome young man again, the very same way he had when I'd entered.

"Yeah, sure am. Look forward to workin' with ya."

The older fellow then sat down directly opposite me.

Another three minutes later, a young man who wouldn't have looked out of place hanging around the Black Market Shopping District walked into the room without a single word. He was sporting a spiky hairdo, a tank top, cargo pants, and leather gloves.

The handsome fellow once again said, "Hello. Will you be joining the Neima & Co. security detail?"

To which the new arrival replied, "Yeah, now hurry up and get started." He seemed unusually ill-tempered, almost like he was putting on a tough guy act.

"We're still expecting one more person," the handsome fellow said.

"Tch!" The new arrival tutted in response and folded his arms. He maintained a stony silence after that.

Two more minutes passed, bringing us squarely to the agreed meeting time of 13:00.

A tall, muscular woman came into the room. "Oops, my bad, guys!" she said. "I thought I had time to spare, so I grabbed a bite to eat and came close to running late!"

Considering what she had just said, it seemed like she had a pretty loose grasp on time.

"You're late, damn it!" the Black Market youth complained.

"Hmm? But I got here just in the nick of time, right?"

"Looks like it's safe to assume that you're joining the security detail for Neima & Co.," the handsome fellow said with a slightly peeved expression before carrying on with the meeting. "Well then, let's start by introducing ourselves. I'm Arthur Lingard. My rank is Rook."

"I am Seira Cynida. My rank is Pawn. I have plans to become Seira Lingard in the near future."

It appeared that the two who had arrived ahead of me were in a relationship after all.

"Bernard Zug's the name. I'm ranked Pawn," said the older fellow.

This shocked everyone at the meeting besides Bernard himself. Their faces all seemed to say, Why is the oldest person out of all of us only ranked a Pawn?

"Ah, well you see, I was a police officer until a little while ago, but I really screwed up on the job. This is a career change for me," he explained, which seemed to satisfy everyone's curiosity.

The Black Market youth spoke up next. "I'm Lebin Grissle. Rook. Just try not to get in my way..." he said, still sulking as he begrudgingly introduced himself.

There's no doubt in my mind he's a Black Market regular.

"I'm Molieze Rotrua. I'm ranked Knight."

It turned out the last one to arrive was Knight rank, the same as me. In addition to being tall and muscular, she had a wild hairdo and deeply tanned skin. From the very start, her cheerful attitude suggested to me that she was pretty confident in her skills as a mercenary.

I introduced myself last. "I'm John Ouzos. I'm ranked Knight."

Now that everyone had finished introducing themselves, the handsome youth —Arthur—looked steadily at me. The woman who'd come at the last minute—Molieze—did too.

"Now then," Arthur began, "I think we'd better start the meeting. Normally, the attendee with the highest rank would chair the meeting, but..."

Before he finished his sentence, the pretty girl with green hair sitting next to him—Miss Seira—glared at us as if to say, I won't forgive anyone who steals my

darling Arthur's thunder.

"I don't really like taking charge, so I'm counting on you," I said to Arthur.

"Me too," said Molieze.

I've never been good at assuming a leadership role, so if I can pass the buck, I'll do just that.

Arthur seemed very earnest, so I was sure he wouldn't use his position to make unreasonable demands. As for Molieze, I was pretty sure she was just being lazy.

As a result of this abdication on our part, Seira looked immensely satisfied and proud of her Arthur.

"In that case, let us first discuss the matter of formation. Does anyone object to using a diamond formation?"

"With these numbers, that makes the most sense," agreed the old fellow—Bernard—as he took out a cigarette.

What Arthur had called a diamond was actually an octahedron. Its vertices would be formed with the client's ship at its center, and the security detail's ships would be assigned to the front, back, port, and starboard, as well as directly above and below the client's ship.

"Now, we just need to decide who to assign where," said Arthur.

"For the top and bottom positions, I believe it is customary to assign ships capable of surveying a wide area. My ship's radar has a range of two billion kilometers, so perhaps you can entrust me with one of those positions?" said Seira, putting her own name forward as soon as Arthur raised the subject.

"Ah, well, my radar has about the same range," I said, volunteering myself as well, which prompted Seira to glare at me with a fearsome expression.

But then, Arthur said, "We'll have the two of you take the top and bottom positions. I'm counting on you, Seira."

Seira's anger started to melt the instant Arthur spoke to her. "Yes! Please, leave it to me!"

"My ship can take a beating, but it's a little slow. How about I take the front?" offered Molieze.

"If we bet on my trusty ship's speed and firepower, we won't have to worry about anyone tailing us. I'll be bringing up the rear!" Lebin said.

In one fell swoop, the front and rear positions had been assigned.

"Well, looks like we're taking port and starboard, huh, champ?" Bernard then said to Arthur.

"Once we're in the field, I'll need you to act in accordance with my decisions," said Arthur. "And don't forget to keep each other informed. 'Report, Contact, Consult.'"

And thus the meeting came to a close, having gone surprisingly smoothly and without any particular disputes.

Though...maybe that's cause for concern in itself, huh?

## NPC No. 28: "All right, everyone. I very much look forward to working with you over the next two days!"

Following the meeting just between the mercenaries taking part in the mission, there was another meeting with the client. Guild staff always attended those types of meetings. Furthermore, unless the client requested otherwise, it was basically understood that only the leader of the security detail would attend that second meeting.

This system had been put in place because, in the past, mercenaries had threatened clients in order to extort unfair amounts of compensation from them. As a countermeasure, the client would meet with the leader only, and a guild staff member would sit in to witness the proceedings. The initial mercenary-only meeting had become customary to make it easier for the leader to report to the client in the second meeting.

However, on this occasion, the client had requested that we all attend the second meeting.

In all honesty, I considered it to be a pain, but I knew that it was probably better to get these discussions out of the way.

And so, in order to meet with the client, we mercenaries who had signed up for the mission headed to the designated meeting room.

Inside the room were two people: the guild staff member who had come to witness the proceedings and a woman dressed very snappily in a suit. The latter had the look of a career woman.

Once that woman saw us, she immediately stood up and said apologetically, "Pleased to meet you! My name is Roenu Nosteu. I work in Neima & Co.'s sales department. Though we had initially planned for the head of the department—meaning the one in charge of this contract—to come to this meeting, we had to make a change. Unfortunately, one of our executives was suddenly unable to

attend an important meeting that had been scheduled well in advance, and our head of sales was sent to represent him. As a result, I, as our chief's deputy on this mission, will be attending this meeting in his place."

Nosteu looked to be somewhere around her mid-twenties. With her short haircut and trim figure, she was a beautiful woman with an energetic air about her.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Arthur Lingard. I will be leading the security detail for this mission." With a breezy smile, he swiftly offered his hand to shake Nosteu's.

Well, that's Arthur for you.

Once the handshake was over and the other five of us had introduced ourselves, we immediately launched into the meeting. That being said, since we had already decided on our approach in our previous meeting, it was mainly Nosteu, Arthur, and the guild employee who did the talking. The rest of us just listened in silence.

While four of us left out of the discussion had expected one mercenary—meaning Seira—to spend the meeting grinding her teeth and staring daggers at the client, this wasn't at all the case. She listened to the discussion between Arthur and Nosteu with a serious expression on her face.

Incidentally, the details of the job description were as follows:

Concerning the transport of a new line of products to be exhibited at a product launch convention being held on Planet Galyfe.

Task description: To guard a single large container ship belonging to Neima & Co.

**Task duration:** The time taken between departure from Planet Ittsu until the transfer of goods at Planet Galyfe is complete—estimated up to 48 hours.

Work conditions: Fuel to be provided for contractor's

spaceship. Client will also pay interstellar gate tolls.

Task requirements: Contractor must bring own spaceship.

Contractor is responsible for the cost of any repairs to their spaceship in the event of damage.

**Compensation:** 1.3 million credits per person. Payment upon arrival. If any combat situations occur, additional benefits will be paid for the risk incurred in accordance with the number of battles.

The meeting proceeded smoothly.

At last, Nosteu said, "All right, everyone. I very much look forward to working with you over the next two days!"

And with that, today's meeting concluded.

Incidentally, as soon as we'd left the meeting room, Molieze addressed Seira.

With a grin, she delivered a bombshell. "Knowing you, I was sure that you'd spend the meeting grinding your teeth and staring daggers at the client. Good job pushing those feelings down."

Seira had a very rational response, however.

"I suppose your misgivings were predicated on the idea that I'm so clingy with Arthur that simply seeing him speak with Nosteu, our client, would make me jealous and that I would ignore my professional obligations in order to intimidate her?" she asked. "However—putting aside the fact that, if we were in a private setting or if a woman really had tried to seduce him, I might do just that—if I were to ignore my professional obligations to make out with my boyfriend during work or to glare menacingly at someone who did nothing more than speak with Arthur, then I would be jeopardizing Arthur's reputation as well as my own, wouldn't I?"

Despite all that, you were pretty quick to glare at me when all I did was mention my radar's effective range, weren't you? But I guess I probably shouldn't worry too much about that kind of thing...

At any rate, the meeting between our group of mercenaries and the client was over, so I decided to immediately make my way to Pattson's Pharmacy in the Black Market Shopping District. It went without saying what my objective was.

On my way to the Black Market, I noticed that Lebin—the Black Market youth—was also headed there.

Well, there's nothing strange about him going there too. He's clearly still afflicted with teenage edgelord syndrome.

In fact, he blends in too well.

That being said, no matter how many times I came to this place, the area always looked sketchy. Even the benches on the street for shoppers to take a rest looked pretty dubious.

Oh, that butcher still has the same sign up. "By slowly simmering oily sludge, we produce the bitterest, darkest gold."

I knew that this was actually referring to a spicy curry croquette with squid ink mixed into the crust. I had tried the croquette on a previous visit, and while it was spicy, it was pretty tasty. I could see why it had become a popular product.

After walking by that shop, I saw a group of women—all suffering from edgelord syndrome like Lebin—crowding around another store.

It looked like someone had set up a street stall selling sweets of some kind. The stall had a sign next to it. "A blessing from the sea with rainbow-colored bowels and life breathed into it by the trees."

Another incomprehensible slogan... Ah, wait, I get it.

They were selling taiyaki with fruit-flavored bean paste and fruit sauce on the inside. Despite how they'd worded their sign, there was an illustration too, so it was easy to understand. Not only that, but the picture had a really fantastical style to it.

I feel like that's the polar opposite of this shopping district's aesthetic. Are you sure that's the look you want to go for?

At any rate, the taiyaki stall offered seven flavors of bean paste filling: strawberry, banana, tangerine, grape, peach, melon, and mango. Besides that, their lineup also included the more conventional fillings of black bean paste, white bean paste, matcha bean paste, chocolate, custard, and caramel. I was suddenly very interested in their taiyaki, but I could hardly get away with joining that crowd of girls to buy one, so I decided to pass for the moment.

As I walked through the Black Market, I saw a number of other signs.

A bookstore with a poster. "Forbidden Books Now in Stock."

The sign in front of a hardware store. "Demon Swords, Enchanted Blades, and Demon-Binding Chains on Sale. Half Price."

A fashion boutique's poster. "Twilight Cloth Now in Stock."

I walked straight past all of those and finally arrived at Pattson's Pharmacy...only to find that, for some reason, Mr. Edgelord—aka Lebin—was also there.

Without a hint of surprise, he said to me, "You here to get the facts too?"

It appeared that he was also one of Gonzales's customers (in his capacity as an informant).

I answered simply. "You could say that." Then, I pushed the door to the pharmacy open and went inside.

"Welcome... Well, this is an unexpected pairing..."

Judging from how Gonzales spoke, I inferred that Lebin was also a regular customer.

Lebin set a wad of cash down on the counter and made a straightforward request. "I want information about Neima & Co. and the former police officer Bernard Zug."

"Got it. How about you?" said Gonzales, addressing me.

"I guess I'll have the same. I've taken the same job, you see."

"I see. This'll probably take me an hour or so. You can wander around here

while you wait."

After Gonzales put down his newspaper and took Lebin's cash payment, he lifted up his ponytail—which he had tied just above his shoulders—and brought it forward. After opening the socket at the now-exposed nape of his neck, he took out a cord that was connected to his computer.

"Sounds good. Guess I'll go take care of some gun maintenance or something," said Lebin before exiting the store.

As soon as Lebin was out of sight, I handed over some cash myself. "Has he been coming here for a while?" I inquired.

"He's started coming recently, I guess. It sounds like he heard about me from the old man who runs the sweet shop. Right now, he's selling fruit-flavored taiyaki."

"I feel like the butcher's shop fits his vibe a little better," I said.



I hadn't expected Lebin to have a sweet tooth. Surprisingly enough, he might've actually been planning to buy a taiyaki while he got his gun checked.

Now then, time for me to read, like always.

Incidentally, though I always found Gonzales reading the newspaper when I visited him, I knew that he actually had light novels and manga stashed behind the counter and under his computer. He just swapped to a newspaper the moment he heard someone open the door. I knew that not mentioning that was the right move, however. It seemed like he was really into an old light novel series called *Reading Island Saga* at the moment.

Exactly one hour later, Gonzales the informant had gathered precisely the information we were after.

And incidentally, it turned out that Lebin had infiltrated that crowd of ladies and had bought himself a fruit-flavored taiyaki.

"Nothing really notable came up about Neima & Co. They seem like a respectable appliance manufacturer, making and selling all kinds of home appliances along with some other stuff, like audio gear. Your mission's purpose really does seem to be to escort them while they transport a new line of products to exhibit at a product launch convention on Planet Galyfe. Though I'm sure they explained that in their job ad."

After pulling the cord out of the socket on the back of his neck, he gulped down some mineral water.

As Lebin watched him do that, his face turned a little bit red.

"Now, about Bernard Zug, the former police officer... According to his official record, it was a disciplinary dismissal, but it seems like some career officer offloaded his own mistakes onto Zug."

"A career officer... You mean a nobleman?" I asked.

"It sounds like his partner, some junior officers, and a few of the career class who Zug had helped in the past had testified that the charges against him were baseless, but apparently, nobody listened to them. It also seems like that career

officer is pretty widely despised by the rest of the police force."

"I'll bet. I guess that means that, if anything, Zug resents them."

In that case, it sounded like there wasn't much chance of anyone attacking us, so nothing to worry about there.

At any rate, I was grateful to learn that this seemed to be a safe job. All that was left was to make the most of the job itself.

The only other thing on my mind was the way Lebin's gaze seemed a bit *too* steadily fixed on Gonzales... That worried me a bit.

# NPC No. 29: "We can't have that! Our company's fate depends on making it to this new product launch! We cannot afford to be late!"

Our mission's start date had arrived. Of course, no one was late today, and we all assembled at the point of departure—the guild's hangar—on time.

"Pleased to meet you. I am Leegus Bandolban, the one overseeing this mission. This product launch is a very important event for our company. I expect you to get us there swiftly and safely."

Our client greeted us with a stiff expression that he'd probably worn since birth. Leegus Bandolban, the head of sales for Neima & Co., was our chief client for this mission.

Behind him was a medium-sized container ship—the Lannoytan. Some of the company's staff were loading the ship with products for the event and travel provisions. According to Bandolban, this ship belonged to the company, and its pilot for this mission was also a company employee.

Our job was to safely escort this single container ship to Planet Galyfe.

The current time was 6:55 a.m., and departure was set for 7:00 a.m.

First, we would travel for twenty-four hours to a gate leading to Planet Galyfe. Our estimated time of arrival would be 7:00 a.m. tomorrow.

During the night, meaning between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. the following day, we'd shift to autopilot and take four-hour watch shifts in groups of three. Those not on watch would take that time as an opportunity to rest.

Once we passed through that gate, we would spend an additional fourteen hours traveling to Planet Galyfe. We'd reach our destination at approximately 9:00 p.m. on the day of the convention.

Assuming we didn't encounter any particular problems, we would arrive at that planet and finish our mission in thirty-eight hours.

The company's staff finished loading the ship, and it was time for us to depart.

Things went really smoothly at first once we got started. There were no mechanical issues.

The old ex-police officer, Bernard, kept telling pointless stories, and I found myself getting a little bit annoyed by them. Molieze teased Seira, causing her to turn bright red. But no one was stupid enough to disturb the peace.

For a while, time passed very peacefully. But about eight hours into the mission, I saw a signature appear on my radar. After checking it out, I reported it to Arthur.

"Um... Do you have a minute?" I asked.

"What is it?"

"Between two and three o'clock, about 1.6 billion kilometers away, I can see an unregistered convoy. I think they're probably pirates."

Seira seemed to have sighted the unregistered convoy and contacted Arthur as well. "I've just confirmed their signature too. If we stay on this course, there's a possibility of us crossing paths with them. I think it would be best for us to either change our course or sit tight and wait for them to pass by."

Molieze, Lebin, and Bernard seemed to share Seira's opinion.

"No objections here."

"Whatever seems like less of a pain in the ass."

"I'll leave it up to you."

This plan of action seemed optimal—it would prioritize safety while still allowing us to reach our destination as quickly as possible.

"Got it. I'll just get the client's permission," said Arthur. "Mr. Bandolban, I don't suppose you'd have a moment?"

"What seems to be the matter?"

"The truth is that we've just discovered a convoy that looks to be made up of pirates. They don't seem to have noticed us yet, but if we proceed on our

course, there is a possibility that we will cross paths with them. We think it would be prudent to either change course or reduce our speed and wait for them to pass by."

Arthur reported the pirate sighting and suggested two potential courses of action to evade them, but the head of sales rejected both suggestions with a severe expression on his face.

"We can't have that!" the head of sales yelled. "Our company's fate depends on making it to this new product launch! We cannot afford to be late!" His angered expression carried a lot of weight. Perhaps it was because his face was naturally fierce.

But Arthur was not overwhelmed by the pressure exerted by the head of sales. He pointed out the risks of not taking one of his proposed actions.

"However, if we end up intercepting these pirates, we will waste a lot more time in combat," he stressed. "In the worst-case scenario, we might be endangering you and your employees."

As a matter of fact, Arthur was right. Battling the pirates would take time, and it would put the clients themselves in danger.

Nosteu chimed in at that moment. "Sir! For the sake of our own safety, let's listen to the professionals!" She was followed by a number of company staff members who all attempted to convince the head of sales that he was misguided.

"We can't! We simply must make it to the convention hall as quickly as possible!" cried the head of sales.

I didn't know why he was so desperate, but this was really starting to become a problem.

"I guess we have no choice. Seira, continue your surveillance of the pirates. Ouzos, keep an eye on our perimeter," Arthur instructed.

He was in the process of reluctantly complying with our client's instructions when we heard a crackling sound over the Lannoytan's comms link. Moments later, the head of sales vanished from our monitors.

Nosteu replaced the head of sales on-screen with a beautiful smile on her face. "I beg your pardon, everyone. Can we go with the option of changing course?" she asked, readily accepting Arthur's suggestion.

Huh? Did I just see her hide a stun baton behind her back...?

Wait, that was a heavy-duty model I saw for sale on the Milk River online store. Military grade too.

Well, given that the employees' lives were at stake, I can kind of see where she's coming from... But wasn't that a bit merciless?

You're scarier than I thought, Ms. Nosteu...

Once we had changed course as Arthur had proposed and had made some progress, I received a call from Seira.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure. What's the matter?"

Thinking she might have found something, I panicked at first and double-checked my own radar. I didn't notice anything different, however.

Seira then said something that came completely out of the blue.

"First of all, I'd like to say that I'm sorry for glaring at you the other day. I didn't think that your ship could really detect objects at a range of two billion kilometers," Seira said. She apologized with a serious expression on her face.

"Oh, that? It really didn't bother me."

I really hadn't been too concerned about it, but it looked like it had been bothering her.

She explained further. "In the past, I worked with someone who claimed they could survey up to a distance of two billion kilometers, but it turned out they could only manage up to 500 million kilometers. Thanks to that person, we faced a number of unfortunate consequences..."

I see, so that was a look of suspicion she gave me back then.

You do get people like that sometimes. People who make wild claims while

actually being useless. They end up causing trouble for everyone else...

Molieze took that moment to interrupt our heart-to-heart.

"You need to learn to see through guys like that, you know?" she said. "Instead of always staring at your boyfriend's butt."

Seira turned bright red. "Wha— What are you saying?!"

She's totally just messing with you, you know... Though I'm kind of grateful to her for lifting the mood.

Another three hours passed.

Luckily, the unregistered convoy that we had thought to be pirates had made a complete about-face and was gone from our radars. Though if they really were pirates, then they had probably found some other prey—so strictly speaking, we probably shouldn't be celebrating.

Four hours after that, it was time for us to start taking turns on the night shift.

The first group of three to rest comprised Arthur, Seira, and Bernard.

Since Seira and I had the most powerful radars, we couldn't both rest at the same time, and if we wanted to grant her wish to do everything in tandem with Arthur, this was how it had to be.

Apparently, they were also taking turns on the night shift aboard the Lannoytan. The first of their crew on duty gave us a perfunctory greeting.

It's true that when it comes to security work, the hardest part is when nothing is going on. Though an uneventful journey is certainly desirable, when nothing happens, you get bored. And when you're bored, you get sleepy.

Moreover, given that Seira and I had the strongest radar capabilities and could not afford to overlook any changes in our readings, neither of us could sleep while on duty, no matter how bored or sleepy we were.

It was times like these when I would welcome someone who couldn't stop talking, but the biggest talker here by far, Molieze, was fast asleep. Sleeping on the job.

I could clearly hear her snoring, so there was no doubt about it.

I decided I'd connect to her exclusive comms channel and send her a very loud alert. But just as I was about to do so, Lebin called me.

"Hey. Got a minute?" he said.

I'm pretty sure we have no common interests to talk about. What the heck does he want?

Then he asked, "Say, have you known Pattson the informant a long time?" It turned out that he wanted to discuss Gonzales.

"Yeah, we've been friends since high school."

Lebin seemed just a bit shocked by that and then hurled an impassioned question my way. "Does that mean you know what stuff she likes? Food, accessories, anything will do! Just tell me!"

What's with him? Wait, don't tell me...

Could Lebin be in love with Gonzales?!

Come to think of it... I did kind of get that impression.

If that's the case, then Gonzales probably hasn't told Lebin his true identity. Well, I guess he wouldn't unless he was asked. That's just his personality.

Should I tell him the truth now, before it's too late? Or should I maybe tell some lie to break his heart now, before he learns the truth? "I'm pretty sure she's seeing someone, though it isn't me." That could be the best way to get him to move on...

However, unable to summon the courage to take either of these options, I ran from my responsibilities.

"B-Back in high school, Gonzales liked anime and light novels," I said. "Probably still does..."

Incidentally, Gonzales had always been one of my otaku friends, so that much was actually true.

"R-Really...?" said Lebin with a slightly bemused expression.

Well, Gonzales looks like a career woman now, so that might be hard to imagine.

After our conversation wrapped up, I was pretty sure that Lebin spent the rest of his shift doing web searches for otaku stuff.

As our shift ended, I contacted Seira and informed her that Molieze herself had said, "When you wake me up, send me a really loud alert. If you don't, I won't be able to wake up. Enjoy your shift."

While I had kept quiet about Molieze sleeping through her shift, I had to make sure she was punished for sleeping on the job.

## NPC No. 30: "Well, if it isn't a rival company! Accelerate at once! We've got to make it to Planet Galyfe before them, even if only by a little!"

After my discussion with Lebin—well, I guess you'd call it a discussion—I changed places with Arthur and the other two taking the next shift and managed to get a decent four hours of sleep.

When six o'clock in the morning rolled around, Molieze, who'd been sleeping for the past eight hours, complained to me about having been roused from her slumber by the loud alert Seira had sent her. I pointed out the fact that she'd slept for all of her shift as well, though, and that shut her up.

After that, we submitted our reports of any activity we'd observed overnight to Neima & Co.'s head of sales. It seemed like he had finally recovered from the effects of the stun gun that had knocked him out the day before. Once we were finished with that, it was 6:50 a.m., and we were just arriving at the gate linked to Planet Galyfe.

Incidentally, not too far from this gate—just 150 million kilometers away—was a main sequence star. In other words, there was a sun in the vicinity, and the interstellar gate really looked like a colossal sunflower opening its petals toward it.

The head of sales was ecstatic that we had managed to arrive at the gate ahead of schedule. "All right! Now let's get through the gate!" he cried out, breathing heavily through his nostrils. He then attempted to steer the ship forward.

However, it wasn't as simple as that.

An order then came from gate management. "We're terribly sorry. We still need to check your vessel. Please wait ten more minutes."

For the head of sales, this was a completely unforgivable statement.

"Who cares about your checks?!" he yelled. "Hurry up and let us through! We're in a hurry! The fate of our company rests in the balance!"

Here was the beginning of yet another explosive tantrum, just like the one he'd had the day before. At that moment, Nosteu appeared behind him.

Before she had her chance to shine, the woman working as the operator for the gate management colony stepped in. "In that case, are you willing to take full responsibility in the event of an accident? We've been recording this conversation and we have the name of your ship and director, so you won't be able to talk your way out of it."

The head of sales could only splutter in response. "W-Wait... That's a little... Well..."

"If that's the case, waiting ten more minutes won't be a problem. All right?" the operator said cheerfully. She had effortlessly plunged the head of sales into silence.

Well done, operator! I thought, You shut him up with just a few words.

Since we had to sit tight anyway, Arthur seized the opportunity to take the lead in further communications with the operator. He inquired about the present transport conditions.

"Excuse me. How are things on the other side of the gate?" he asked. "Could you tell us about any congestion or accidents, or perhaps give us a celestial phenomena forecast?"

For an instant, the woman working as the operator had a look on her face like a hunter who had just spotted her prey. But in the very next moment, her expression seemed troubled despite there being a hint of a smile on her face.

"The truth is that we've been seeing more victims of pirate activity. I guess that's partly to do with the appliance manufacturer product launch convention, but even so, there seem to be a lot of cases. To think this is happening even with the army and the police being on a pirate-hunting spree..."

"That is...quite bizarre," admitted Arthur.

It certainly was strange.

This job had only come up in the first place because the army and police were on their pirate-hunting spree, which had led to an increase in cargo shipments. The fact that more people in the area were falling victim to pirates despite those efforts meant there had to be some other cause besides the product launch convention on Planet Galyfe.

While I pondered this, ten minutes passed.

"All right, ten minutes are up! Now hurry up and let us through the gate!" cried the head of sales. He was getting worked up again.

Hold on a minute. There's a line, you know?

The gate was very large, meaning about ten ships could pass through it at a time. There was really no reason to be so impatient.

I think you'd better learn your lesson already. Nosteu is right behind you again, and she's smiling...

At any rate, we managed to pass safely through the gate. From there, we then set our course for Planet Galyfe and blasted off.

Though our journey had gone well enough so far, I was suddenly overcome by an inexplicable feeling of dread. Still, five hours passed after we had cleared the gate, and nothing had gone wrong.

Lunchtime arrived. I was just about to eat a cheese-flavored energy bar and wash it down with a plasti-carton of coffee when I suddenly noticed a reading on my radar.

"Ships sighted at seven o'clock. Maybe two of them?" I said.

"I've confirmed their presence as well. I can indeed see two ships at seven o'clock. Their hull codes read...STE. Sunshine Tree Electronics."

Seira seemed to have made the same discovery, and she had even checked their hull codes right away.

It would seem that these ships were headed to the same place as we were, and for the same reason too.

Of course, the head of sales wasted no time in reacting and started making unreasonable demands again. "Well, if it isn't a rival company! Accelerate at once! We've got to make it to Planet Galyfe before them, even if only by a little!"

To make matters worse, Nosteu was nowhere to be seen on the bridge.

Believe it or not, but the head of sales then proceeded to push the pilot out of his seat, take the wheel, and open up the ship's throttle!

"Whoa! What the hell?!" Molieze yelled.

Molieze had been at the head of our formation, and the head of sales's rash decision to increase the Lannoytan's speed had startled her. She had to make a sharp turn to avoid crashing.

Of course, the other five of us, myself included, all had to make our own maneuvers to avoid any collisions between us.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?! You're an asshole, boss!" "Gah!"

Aboard the Lannoytan, the employee who'd been piloting it decked the head of sales and immediately regained control of the ship. He steered to avoid hitting any of us.

Luckily, for safety's sake, we'd all been cruising along with enough distance between us, so in the end, there were no collisions.

However, in the very next moment, a beam blasted through the space between our ships and the Lannoytan. If we hadn't all already been taking evasive maneuvers, one of us might have sustained a direct hit.

The beam had come from behind us: in other words, one of the ships registered to Sunshine Tree Electronics had fired upon us.

No matter how much you want to reign victorious at this new product launch convention, I think that's going a little far... What are the directors of these corporations thinking?

With that on my mind, I executed an about-face turn so the nose of my ship would face the STE vessels.

Then, I heard Arthur's voice cry, "Lannoytan, you are to withdraw from this sector at once! Seira, stay on their tail and report this to the military and the police! The rest of you, turn around and engage!"

His on-the-spot decision-making was commendable, and he had given everyone precise instructions.

I could never lead a team like he can.

"Copy that! Arthur, good luck in battle!"

"This is the Lannoytan; we copy! Full speed ahead!"

Following Arthur's orders, the Lannoytan and Seira withdrew from the sector at full speed.

*Now then, time to get back to work—battle.* 

I had to admit that the selfish actions of the head of sales had ended up saving us. That left me with conflicting emotions.

#### Aside: Sunshine Tree Electronics?

The situation continued to evolve on the ship's bridge.

"You moron!"

A handsome man dressed sharply in a suit—the look of an elite businessman—was beating up a ruffian wearing attire that contrasted starkly with his own.

"Didn't I tell you that you shouldn't fire under any circumstances before I gave you the signal?" he cried.

The handsome maybe-businessman grabbed the man he'd just slugged by the collar and started beating him again. He was surrounded by the rest of the crew on the bridge, but not one of them tried to stop him.

"But, but the bastards suddenly sped up, so I thought they were going to run away and... Sorry," the ruffian protested feebly. The beating had left him with a bloody nose.

The handsome man dressed for business had no time for his excuses. "Thanks

to you, we have to abandon our plan now!" he yelled and began to beat up the other man once more.

"I'm sorry! I only fired because I was worried that they'd get away! I didn't think they'd dodge it!"

However, this second attempt at making excuses seemed to push the handsome man in the suit over the edge.

"You 'didn't think'? *That's* your excuse? Ah, you did it on purpose, didn't ya? You fired on *purpose*, just to spoil my brilliant, perfect, transcendent plan, didn't ya?!"

"I-I did nothing of the—!"

"Now I get it. You're someone else's spy, aren't ya? You've gotta be!
Otherwise, there's no way you'd try to interfere with my brilliant, perfect,
transcendent plan!"

With that, the handsome man dressed for business smiled, having accepted his own deduction, as he took a blaster out of his pocket and pulled the trigger.

"Clean that up," he said.

The other man was no longer moving. Without even looking back at him, the handsome businessman glared at his real prey, who were displayed on the screen in front of him.

"Tch! Thanks to that spy, this'll have to be our last job! All right, men! This is our final target. Don't let them get away!"

"Aye aye, sir!" cried the crew in unison.

# NPC No. 31: "I'll draw fire from one of the ships! While I keep that one busy, please render the other ship immobile, but you mustn't sink it entirely! We need to capture the crew!"

Though both ships undoubtedly had the outward appearance of Sunshine Tree Electronics vessels, they were obviously both armed to the teeth. They had even deployed combat drones.

Whatever way you looked at them, they weren't proper container ships at all.

I was sure that company was fairly upstanding since I hadn't heard any especially bad rumors about them... I guess you never know what's going on behind the scenes.

Hang on. If they really are from STE, why would they plainly display the company's logo and expose their hull codes like that?! This is probably a ploy perpetrated by another rival company or something.

As I pondered that, Arthur hurled a new set of orders my way.

"I'll draw fire from one of the ships! While I keep that one busy, please render the other ship immobile, but you mustn't sink it entirely!" he yelled. "We need to capture the crew!"

We all understood what he was going to do next from those orders.

"Then I'll come and support you. I'll shut them right up!" Lebin said and immediately headed for the same ship Arthur had in his sights.

"All right. We old-timers need to pull our weight too," said Bernard.

"I'm still under thirty!" Molieze cried.

"Well, you're still older than the other two," Bernard, an old-timer himself, then pointed out.

While Molieze snapped back at him, they both accompanied me, and we

headed toward the remaining enemy ship. We were naturally intercepted by drones as we did so.

"Let me take care of these! I'll leave the big sucker to you guys!" said Molieze before deploying her barrier and heading for the swarm of drones.

"Well, I guess we know what our target is. I'm counting on you, youngster."

"Roger that. I'll support you."

Then, old Bernard and I went together to face the remaining ship.



### Aside: Sunshine Tree Electronics?

"Critical damage to turret four on the port side!"

"Nozzles one and three have been taken out!"

"Shit! Our barrier generator has gone haywire!"

As I sat in the captain's chair aboard the bridge, I heard nothing but report after report of damage to a ship that was supposed to have brought me endless riches.

"What are those drones doing?! I know you deployed them!"

"Two-thirds of them have already been destroyed!"

"We have manned craft too, don't we?! Deploy them now!"

Shit!

My plan had been to commandeer ships belonging to Sunshine Tree Electronics, modify them, and pretend they were chartered ships while taking out or commandeering any rival companies' ships. Then, I'd sell any of those companies' goods to foreign states and any crew into slavery inside imperial territory. And up until this point, it had been a resounding success.

With those results in my pocket, I had told Sunshine Tree Electronics that since my activities were going to help them dominate the upcoming product launch convention—while also creating a shortage of products from other companies that would lead to better sales for them—they should pay us thirty percent of their revenue every month from now on.

If they refused to sign that contract, I was going to notify authorities around the empire that I'd done all of this as an employee of STE.

This was the perfect plan to obtain a cash cow! But it had just been ruined thanks to one incompetent underling who had decided to fire at the competition all by himself! How could it have all unraveled so easily?!

Another one of my damned subordinates checked in. "This is the cargo bay! The hatch we usually use to unload things has been destroyed and won't open!"

"Then just blast it open with a laser beam!" I screamed.

"Roger! Okay, everyone out of the way!"

Do I have to tell these idiots everything? They're all so incompetent!

Who's behind this? Who's conspiring against me?

The Kaides Pirate Band, by far the biggest band around, had just been destroyed by the military! And the most vicious band, the Grimreap Pirate Band, had just been crushed by a joint assault by the military, mercenaries, and Planet Racers!

That meant that the next pirate to take the top spot should have been me, Stalba Bandegro, and my Bandegro Pirate Band!

Whose plan was this? Who's trying to stop me from getting enough cash to establish my dominance?!

At that moment, I felt a slight tremor go through the ship.

A report came in from the bay. "I've blown the hatch open! Our manned craft can now be deployed!"

"All right! Go swat down those damned mosquitos!"

Our enemy only had five ships while we had nearly twenty.

There's no way out for them!

"All right! They've been on our tails for a while now; time to turn the..."

Tables!

Before I could finish yelling out my order, the ship rattled violently and we all heard a deafening roar.

"The cargo bay's been hit! Oxygen leak detected! I'm closing the bulkhead!"

How is this happening...? How are two lone light craft practically sinking my ship?! You've gotta be kidding me!

"Hey! What happened to Ship Two? Why aren't they covering us?!"

I then issued an order to Ship Two. However...

"This is Ship Two!" they cried back. "We're also under fire—we can't get away!"

Their response was the very epitome of incompetence.

Shit! This is all because that moron decided to jump the gun! Everything started to go wrong after he fired on them!

I shouldn't have killed him so quickly. I should have hurt him more first and made him tell me who sent him here!

Then, another report came to piss me off even more.

"New ships identified! They're military vessels! Five... Six... Seven... Eight...
Twelve of them in all!"

You've! Got! To! Be! Kidding! Me!

What is the military doing here?! Sunshine Tree Electronics can't afford to let the military think this is all their doing, so I thought they'd keep their mouths shut!

Why is this happening?! Why aren't things going the way I thought they would?!

The damned army broadcast an order. "All ships engaged in combat, disengage at once. I repeat, disengage at once."

At that, the bombardment against my ship finally ceased.

"Now!" I yelled. "Take off at full speed!"

There's no reason for me to stay put and obey orders like a sheep! Ship Two will need to be sacrificed, but at least I can get away.

But despite my orders, my ship didn't budge, not even by a millimeter.



After we'd disabled both of Sunshine Tree Electronics' ships, the army arrived and surrounded them.

"Arthur! Are you all right?" Seira yelled.

Having brought the army with her, she had switched completely out of professional mode and was crying out passionately to Arthur. If she'd been in the same room, I'm sure she would have leaped at him and showered him with kisses.

With Arthur's skills, I was sure he'd always had every chance of surviving, but you never really knew what would happen on the battlefield. I guessed it was only natural for her to worry.

I would have liked her to worry about the other four of us too—myself included—but I guess it made sense for her to naturally give her boyfriend extra attention.

Incidentally, the container ship—the Lannoytan—was standing by with the military ships a short distance away.

After that...moving reunion, we were about to resume our stated mission when a call from one of the army's ships came through.

On the monitor was a celebrity we all knew. It was a woman with black hair, purple eyes, and fair skin—Captain Priscilla Hyliat.

"Very well done," she said. "To think that just five of you disabled two modified warships all by yourselves."

What is the princess of the imperial guard's propaganda machine doing here?
All six of us were bewildered.

Captain Hyliat then addressed Arthur as if it were only natural to do so. "Mr.

Arthur Lingard... You were in command, weren't you?"

I could see why she'd ignore me, but despite the presence of the much older Bernard and the Knight-ranked Molieze, she had wasted no time in focusing on Arthur.

Wow, she immediately set her sights on a rising star, huh? Though I guess Seira might have told her about him.

"Yes. Everyone entrusted me with taking command for this mission, so, though it may have been presumptuous of me to do so, I accepted that responsibility," Arthur said, politely replying with an air of...humility, I guess.

Captain Hyliat regarded Arthur with a slightly expectant smile on her lips. "Is that so? It would be very reassuring to have someone of your talents among our ranks in the military," she said.

She was being a bit sly. I imagined that the brass had put into place a policy of recruiting promising new talent whenever possible. There were many who had been convinced to join by such methods, and now she'd set her sights on Arthur.

Though it was probably a coincidence that Hyliat had turned out to be close by, she wasn't going to miss this chance to make a pass at him. If he were to enlist, he would be a godsend for them.

Of course, there was one person who would rather die before she let that happen...

"I beg your pardon, Captain Hyliat, but are you sure you needn't concern yourself with the arrest of these criminals?"

"Ah, no. My men have their orders, so no problem there."

That's right—she had to contend with Seira.

Seira butted into Hyliat and Arthur's conversation with obviously insincere politeness.

"Oh, is that so? Well, we unfortunately still have work to do, so we must excuse ourselves. Arthur, let's get back to *our* job. Let's go, everyone," ordered

Seira, dragging Arthur back into her own sphere of influence.

She then immediately accelerated and headed back to the spot where the Lannoytan was standing by.

Incidentally, Captain Hyliat was momentarily struck silent by Seira's aggression.

I later heard that, with a bewitching smile on her lips, she had muttered, "I wonder if those two are lovers. But I really want that Arthur." As a human resource, of course.

That was only a rumor, though.

### NPC No. 32: "Oh? Is that you, Mr. Ouzos?"

On Planet Galyfe, our mission's destination, we accepted our payments before disbanding and going our separate ways.

You may ask, why hadn't we accepted a job for the security detail for the return journey as well?

The reason was simple: the client had only requested for us to escort them one way.

There were sometimes requests for the return journey, but that meant that clients would end up having to pay for mercenaries to stand by until they were ready to head back. If the wait time was particularly long, that could end up being pretty expensive, so most requests were one-way only.

Incidentally, after we disbanded...

Lebin went pirate-hunting.

Bernard, the old-timer, took a vacation.

Molieze accepted another security detail mission.

Lastly, Arthur and Seira—having been identified as key players in the resolution of the STE incident—were invited to a military reception.

Fortunately for me, there was a gate bound for Planet Ittsu nearby, so I was able to head home immediately.

Incidentally, it turned out that everyone besides Bernard and me had received invitations to the reception.

Well, even if I had received one, I would have excused myself. It was no skin off my back.

By the way, that unreasonable director from Neima & Co. apparently ended up being demoted as punishment for taking control of the ship without permission and making a number of decisions that put other employees in danger. He was now a regular employee.

Usually, when someone without a pilot's license took control outside of an emergency situation, it was guaranteed that they'd be arrested, so he had actually gotten off lightly. They had apparently decided to treat his situation as an emergency, so he had been spared in that sense.

While he had acted selfishly and had thrown a number of tantrums, he had made no attempt to steal credit from his subordinates or blame them for his own failures. The fact that he had openly admitted being at fault was probably why the authorities had been lenient with him.

There were several things different about my return trip to Planet Ittsu. Not only was I no longer required to work security, but I also had to use different gates on this trip. Since they were spaced pretty far apart, I ended up taking a roundabout route. But at least I was able to travel at a more relaxed pace as I returned to Planet Ittsu, where my guild branch was situated.

Funnily enough, I ended up running into Old Man Lohnes once I got to the guild. But it wasn't at his usual counter—instead, he was in the visitors' lobby that was right past the guild's entrance. In place of his usual uniform, he was wearing a suit today. He kind of stood out.

"Funny seeing you here. Going somewhere?" I asked.

"Headed on vacation. I'll be seeing my wife and daughter for the first time in a while!" Old Man Lohnes announced as he merrily adjusted the knot in his necktie.

"Then I guess I'll take some time off too."

"Not so fast," he said. "I've asked someone to take over for me."

"If it's a girl, that's only going to get me into trouble."

"Don't worry, he's a man."

One time when Old Man Lohnes had gone on vacation, I'd tried to get help from the female employee to whom he had handed over his workload. She was a woman with blue eyes and green hair tied in a side ponytail.

Of course, I couldn't be rude to her, and I had been sure to take care in how I

spoke to her and what I wore. I'd felt that my outfit and attitude should have been good enough to convince female clerks to serve me at any regular shop in town.

Incidentally, after I had become a mercenary, the very first female guild worker I'd approached had the following to say:

"Tch... I'm sorry. I'm very busy at the moment, so please try another counter."

She had blown me off with unreserved distaste.

Fortunately, the girl with the green hair who had been filling in for Old Man Lohnes hadn't behaved that way. She'd had no problem showing me what jobs were available and helping me through the application process.

However, a mercenary who had been watching us had felt quite differently.

"Hey, asshole! Can't you see you're bothering her? Get the hell outta here!" he'd bellowed before pointing his blaster at me.

The woman behind the counter had protested, but he hadn't wanted to hear a word of it.

Utterly convinced by his own version of events, he had appealed fervently to the receptionist. "Don't worry! I'll chase this ugly bastard away right now!"

I had been pretty pissed off and had even thought about fighting back, but I was afraid of bearing the brunt of his blaster. Fighting had seemed like too much trouble too. In the end, I'd scampered away instead.

As that had unfolded, I could hear some other mercenaries, probably his buddies, guffawing behind me.

Though I only found out later, that mercenary was actually the idiot son of a famous nobleman. Nowadays, he was a Queen-rank mercenary who had a lot of influence in the capital.

There was no guarantee that there weren't still people at the guild ready to follow his example, and there was Mr. Hero to worry about as well.

At any rate, I had no interest in ending up like that again, nor did I want to cause any trouble for any hardworking receptionists.

In case you were wondering, when I had gone to receive my pay on Planet Galyfe, I had spoken to a male worker.

"Well, I'll at least take some time off," I said. Since I had already planned to take a vacation, I thought that I might as well extend it until the old man was back.

At that moment, Old Man Lohnes reminded me just how fast news could travel.

"By the way, I heard you turned down that military reception," he said.

"Yeah, well, it sounded like a pain in the ass."

What he'd heard wasn't quite true, but I didn't feel like correcting him. From the military's perspective, it probably looked better to claim that I had turned them down rather than admit they'd never invited me in the first place.

Old Man Lohnes checked the time again. He then realized it was time for him to board his intra-atmosphere flight to take him to visit his family, so he exited the guild.

I decided to hurry home and get some sleep myself.

However, even though I'd planned to get some shut-eye, I was seriously hungry.

Normally, I would have bought some ingredients from a supermarket in my neighborhood on my way home, but I suddenly found myself heading downtown instead.

This street had nothing but restaurants as far as the eye could see. Floating signs, ad droids, and neon signs loudly announced every option the restaurants had to offer. Some signs showed holographic scenes of the kitchen inside or diners enjoying their meal. Others simply shared the history of a restaurant, displayed menu items, and invited customers to come inside. One restaurant even sat atop a floating platform—they projected a tractor beam to pull customers in.

That was just the atmosphere of this street. Of course, many of these

restaurants served alcohol, but I could just decide not to go into those places. Even if I were to, I didn't have to get a drink.

After looking for a place with especially tasty-looking food, I found one shop that served some pasta that looked delicious. I ended up having my meal there.

While I was heading to the station to get a train back home, someone suddenly called out to me.

"Oh? Is that you, Mr. Ouzos?"

There was no pretending I hadn't just heard my name. When I turned around to face the owner of the voice, I saw a fellow mercenary. It was Fialka Tielsad (aka Léopard), rank Bishop, and her personal android maid, Shelley.

Though Shelley was in her usual maid outfit, Fialka was not in her usual pilot suit. Instead, she was wearing a blouse, a flared skirt, and pumps—a well-coordinated outfit that any young lady might wear on her day off.

They must have just returned from a shopping trip, as they were each carrying a bag emblazoned with some fashion boutique's logo. Though, strictly speaking, both of those bags must have been Fialka's.

"Hello there. Erm... Can I help you with something?" I asked.

Personally, I couldn't imagine why they were talking to me, but they must have had some reason to do so.

"No. I just happened to spot you, so I felt I should greet you," Shelley said. "Come now, milady. Say hello; don't be rude."

"Wh-What a coincidence... Are you on your way home from work?" asked Fialka after Shelley's prodding.

"Yes. I've just come back after doing some security work. Were you out shopping?"

"Indeed," Shelley answered. "My mistress was invited to a product launch and sale event put on by a famous fashion brand. She took a liking to some of the items on display, so she purchased them." The maid then lifted the bag in her hand slightly to show me.

I didn't recognize the brand, but I was sure that whatever clothes Fialka had

bought would suit her.

Well, I've said my pleasantries; time to excuse myself, I thought.

"Oh, right. Though I won't be able to partake, perhaps you'd like to dine with us?" said Shelley.

What a horrifying suggestion.

"Hold on, Shelley! What are you saying?" Fialka seemed just as mortified as I was as she confronted her maid.

Personally, I knew that just being seen chatting with Fialka would put me in danger, and if the kind of jerks who would give me grief for that much were to see me having dinner with her, I couldn't imagine the harassment that would follow.

So, my first instinct was to confess that I'd already eaten.

"Sorry, but I actually just had dinner."

Shelley looked slightly disappointed. "Oh, I see. Well, you did say that you were on your way home from work, so we shouldn't detain you."

"Well then, please excuse me," I said with a courteous bow before getting out of there.

Good thing I ate first, huh...





### Aside: Fialka Tielsad

I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched him—Ouzos—walk away. Then I glared at Shelley.

"What were you thinking, Shelley?!"

"You said you wanted to apologize to him the next time you met, didn't you?" she asked.

"There's no way I could have done that yet! I wasn't emotionally prepared!"

Shelley had meddled in my affairs in this way often for as long as I'd known her. I had no doubt that she was only thinking of my best interests, but I still considered this habit to be a blemish on her otherwise excellent character.

Still, it's a good thing he knows nothing about fashion labels.

The truth was that the event I'd been invited to was held by a store specializing in lingerie.

My limousine arrived a moment later.

As I was placing my shopping haul in the trunk, Shelley whispered, "I hope you get the chance to show those off to someone one day. The light-blue two-piece, perhaps, or maybe the white G-string. Or, even the black, all-lace two-piece set with the garter belt and stockings."

"Wha?!" I cried, seriously disconcerted.

Shelley giggled and climbed into the limousine.

When we get home, I'm stripping her maid uniform right off her body!

Despite being an android model with an exoskeleton, Shelley hated taking off her maid uniform for some reason. It served as a very good punishment.



The next day, after I was done cleaning my living space, I decided to take a stroll over to Animember.

It was definitely relaxing to find myself in an anime store for the first time in a while.

The building that contained Animember had shops for everything: anime, manga, games, doujinshi, trading cards, and other hobbies as well. I was glad it existed. Most otaku who lived on Planet Ittsu ended up coming to this building too.

Some of the staff members wore cosplay of anime characters, and there were even android staff who swapped out their parts to look exactly like the characters they were dressed up as.

And, unlike some of the female receptionists at the Mercenaries Guild, the clerks here never treated customers differently. Though...I guess there were some female workers who got excited whenever they saw two guys together.

Oh, a new volume of that manga I like is out.

That light novel got a manga adaptation, huh? Guess I'll buy it.

While I was enjoying Animember to my heart's content, someone called my name out of the blue.

"Monsieur Ouzos! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Standing there was Klus Arnoid, someone who'd been a friend of mine since my second year of high school.

"Oh, Lord Arnoid! How goes it?"

"Whether 2D or 3D, pretty girls are precious. I still spend my days in search of that preciousness!"

Klus Arnoid was wearing a reinforcing exoskeleton with pieces that covered his face and his arms to the elbows. He was friends with me and Gonzales.

We had gone to different schools, however. We'd met at the Comic Marché doujinshi convention on Planet Ittsu.

One day, just before he had been about to begin middle school, he'd sustained severe burns that resulted in keloid scarring to his face and both arms. Even when they'd tried clone regeneration therapy, his cells hadn't regenerated for some reason. At one point, he'd even considered getting a full-body prosthesis like Gonzales had now. However, he eventually decided he'd cooperate with medical trials so that doctors might be able to help people

struggling with similar problems one day.

Research had advanced significantly since then. Now, his arms, which had been scarred all over at first, were normal all the way from his elbows to his wrists. His face was supposed to have recovered by sixty percent too.

Incidentally, he had a pretty suave voice. Arnoid was apparently making quite a name for himself as a gaming streamer these days, though he only did it as a hobby.

By the way, when he had found out I'd become a mercenary, the first thing he'd said to me was, "Have you met any beautiful lady mercenaries? Wouldn't a loli who talks like an old lady be the best?!"

Believe it or not, he worked as a public servant now. There were apparently a lot of people working in the same government office as him who shared his hobbies. They always got public holidays off and never worked overtime, so it was easy for them to attend all kinds of events.

It had been a while since we'd seen each other, so we went to a nearby fast-food joint and had a great time chatting and nerding out. I could have spent all night hanging out with him, but as we both had plans for the afternoon, we wrapped things up just after midday.

## NPC No. 33: "Old Man Lohnes is on vacation, so I thought I might take one myself. And I figured that if I'm not working, it'd be the perfect time to get an overhaul."

After finishing lunch with Klus, I headed to a district full of workshops in an industrial area of the city.

All kinds of factories and workshops, big and small, lined the streets here. There were some here that dealt with home appliances, of course, but there were also those that made weapons for both civilian and military use, measuring instruments, other devices, bikes, railroad cars, boats, aircraft, spaceships, and androids, among many other things. People said that you could find anything here as long as it was related to machines.

As for me, I was headed to the location where I'd purchased my ship, the Patchwork.

Originally, I'd bought a secondhand model I'd found lying in that shop and had built my own ship by replacing many of its parts.

Anyway, that workshop was known as the Dolg Repair Shop, a place where they fixed all kinds of things. Those naturally included machines that customers asked them to repair, but they also worked on discarded items they'd found or ones that'd been given to them by their previous owners. They'd sell those repaired finds afterward. I had personally purchased all my home appliances and my ship's armaments from them too.

"Sup, Pops?"

"Hey, it's been a while, huh? Looks like you've managed to avoid biting the dust so far."

This guy who'd struck up a conversation with me as soon as I'd entered the workshop was Bill Dolg, the owner of the place.

Bill was a respectable mechanic. He was short and stocky, and his prominent belly was paired with a heavy beard, so everyone else in the neighborhood—including his fellow mechanics—apparently called him "the Dwarf."

And just as his nickname would suggest—since dwarves were usually imagined as being master craftsmen—his skills as a mechanic were first-class. According to rumors, he'd received fervent requests to join the R&D departments of at least ten top machine manufacturing firms.

As a sign of both respect and friendliness, I always called Dolg "Pops."

"I've somehow managed to stay alive," I said.

"So, what are you after today?"

"I was thinking of asking for an overhaul."

"Did you total your ship or something?" he asked.

"No, that's not it. Old Man Lohnes is on vacation, so I thought I might take one myself. And I figured that if I'm not working, it'd be the perfect time to get an overhaul."

Well, asking for a job at the guild would be a life-and-death gamble without Lohnes too, so I don't intend on looking for work for a while.

Incidentally, Pops and Old Man Lohnes knew each other as well. According to Pops, when Lohnes had still been an active merc, he'd often gone to him for help.

"I see. Well, you're in luck. If you bring your ship in at around ten o'clock tomorrow, my dock'll be vacant. The forms are on the usual shelf, so fill those out for me."

"Understood. Thanks for your help."

During our entire exchange, Pops never stopped his maintenance work on the engine of what looked like a railroad car, not even for a moment.

Then, while I was filling out the forms for my overhaul request, he suddenly asked me the following question:

"Oh, by the way... Are you sure you aren't interested in installing a one-of-a-

kind, special-order weapon?"

Old Man Lohnes had once asked me the same thing. While such modifications might be out of reach for a rookie, once a merc starts making decent money, most find that they want to equip their ship with something that makes it feel special.

For example, some installed high-power laser beams that could only be fired after cutting their ship's engines. There were also missiles tipped with drills to pierce other ships' armor. Some installed enormous, horn-shaped beam sabers on the noses of their ships. I'd even heard about people using manipulator arms capable of projecting tractor beams. As a matter of fact, Pops had received orders for that type.

I'd never changed my response, however.

"Wouldn't that mean that if it breaks or runs out of ammo, I won't be able to get it fixed or reloaded right away? More to the point, those weapons are expensive."

Having a special-order weapon meant that only a limited number of people could make it, and they used special materials to do so. If a weapon like that ever broke or needed to be reloaded in some way, taking care of that would require a lot of extra effort. The materials would cost a lot of money too.

Therefore, I figured that it was better to stick to mass-produced arms—they were easily obtained and had relatively fixed prices. Of course, it wasn't like I couldn't see why other mercs romanticized these special-order weapons, but I didn't have the guts to stake my life on them.

"You haven't changed a bit," Pops said. "Most mercs these days are desperate to have them."

"I guess my radar is sort of like that, though. It's the one time I went with a high-power model."

That being said, though my current radar—which could survey a distance of up to two billion kilometers—was super expensive, it was yet another mass-produced product.

"Well, seeing how some of these people can't make proper use of store-

bought, mass-produced equipment, even if they do get parts specially ordered for their exclusive use, it's not like they'll be able to use 'em right."

Pops did take orders for custom parts, but when he could see that the customer was a total rookie or otherwise seemed useless, he would apparently turn them down. He even did that with nobles. Maybe he was just good enough at what he did to get away with doing that, but maybe Pops was actually from a noble house himself...

The next day, after handing my ship over to Pops, I headed to the guild on foot. My plan was to look for the person who'd taken over Old Man Lohnes's reception duties and then do some target practice.

Based on the notion that all mercenaries should be at least somewhat proficient with firearms, we were required to complete at least one target practice session each year. I usually fulfilled this obligation at the end of the year, but since I was free anyway, I thought I might as well get it out of the way now.

When I arrived at the reception area, I looked at the counter Old Man Lohnes usually occupied. There was a new female receptionist working there with quite a crowd in front of her and no sign of the person Lohnes had mentioned.

After searching around for a while, I still couldn't find Lohnes's replacement. I decided to call him.

"Old Man Lohnes?"

"Hey. What's up? It's not too often that you call me."

I could hear a lot of people talking in the background on Lohnes's end as if he were visiting a resort or something.

"The male receptionist you talked about is nowhere to be seen," I said.

"That shouldn't be. His name is Alphonse Zaystall. He just finished his training period and was going to come to fill in for me. I'd heard he was a really diligent, hardworking guy."

"What does he look like?"

"Uh... I'm pretty sure he was on the short side, with short blond hair and blue eyes. I think I heard he's kind of frail-looking too?"

"Don't tell me you've never met him?"

"When I put in my time off request, I asked the HR rep whether they had any male receptionists, and they said they did. He's got to be a man. In fact, I was supposed to talk with him that day we met in the lobby, but an accident happened near a gate and he couldn't get there in time. I had a plane to catch myself, so I asked HR to hand him some instructions I'd written down. Ah, if he isn't anywhere in reception, he might be in the back collating documents, so try asking one of the other workers."

"Got it. I'll try that."

I hung up the phone and asked a male employee who happened to be walking by where I might find this Alphonse Zaystall.

"Oh, if that's who you're looking for, he's right over there," said the worker, pointing straight at the desk where Old Man Lohnes usually sat.

Now that I think about it, it makes sense that only that spot would be vacant since Old Man Lohnes isn't around.

However, it was, in fact, the very place where a crowd was forming around a new female receptionist. Not only that, but some members of that crowd were women too.

I stole a furtive glance through a gap in the crowd to see that there was indeed a receptionist there who was small in stature, frail-looking, and had blond hair and blue eyes.

However, rather than a short haircut, this receptionist had long, shiny hair worn in a beautiful single braid. And, looking at this receptionist, *she* appeared to be a pretty girl of about sixteen or seventeen.

To become a guild employee, one needed a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate. That meant she had to be at least eighteen going on nineteen. If that was the case, she was quite baby-faced. And her voice sounded unmistakably like that of a lovely girl's.

However, I considered the fact that there was no reason the male employee I'd asked would've lied to me. This meant that, in truth, that *lovely girl* was unquestionably a *man*.

In other words, Alphonse Zaystall, the guild worker Old Man Lohnes had asked to fill in for him, was what you'd call a *cross-dresser*!

Damn you, Old Man Lohnes! Sure, he may be a man, but with those looks? He might as well be a girl!

'Kay. I'm definitely steering clear of him.

Having said that, there was no way for me to submit my target practice application without working with a receptionist.

But, well, I've pretty much always just left it until the end of the year... Why not just keep that up this year?

For now, I guess I'll just ask when Old Man Lohnes will get back.

I prepared to leave, but...

"Excuse me. Aren't you Mr. John Ouzos?" someone asked me.



"Y-Yes, that's right. Who might you be?"

It went without saying who it was, but I gingerly turned around to look.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Alphonse Zaystall. As of yesterday, I've been assigned to work in reception here."

Mr. Alphonse Zaystall, who had just been behind the reception desk—and whom I could still only see as a pretty young woman wearing a suit—had left his counter to come over and greet me with a smile.

The mercs who had been flocking to his counter up until now had all turned to glare wordlessly at me.

I could have sworn that I heard a number of resentful complaints too.

"Why did he alone get a personal greeting?"

"There's no way I'm letting that ugly bastard go near my Ally-poo!"

"Impossible! I shan't approve of such a pairing!"

These comments seemed so real...

"P-Pleased to meet you too," I stammered. "So, what business might you have with me?"

I guessed that he would have been able to get an idea of my appearance from my file and pick me out based on that, but I didn't know what reason he had for stopping me now.

"I'll be taking care of any work you need to be done until your usual agent, Antonio Lohnes, gets back from his vacation. I look forward to working with you," Alphonse said.

In my mind, I could only see *his* smile as *he* greeted me as being the smile of the devil...though I was sure that Alphonse himself bore no such ill will.

### NPC No. 34: "Yeah, yeah. I sure am a coward, aren't I? Let's just say that you win."

"So, what brings you to the guild today?" Zaystall asked me with a brilliant smile.

"I-I'd like to get my mandatory target practice out of the way..."

At any rate, I'd better get out of here as soon as I'm done with the paperwork. If I don't, this situation could become life-threatening.

"Understood. Let me go fetch the required forms."

After ascertaining my business, he headed toward the door that led to the area behind the counter, smiling the whole time.

But as Zaystall did that, some handsome guy grabbed him by the arm.

"Hey, you don't need to talk to jerks like him. How about you skip work today and come have some fun with me?" said the hunk. He was hitting on Zaystall pretty aggressively.

Zaystall gently shook his arm free of the hunk's grasp. "I'm terribly sorry, but you're preventing me from doing my job. Whenever I think you're about to make a work-related inquiry, you feed me some pathetic pickup line. If you have no business with the guild, please leave."

Zaystall followed that up by glaring at the pickup artist like he was a piece of garbage.

The pickup artist then bombarded Zaystall with his own incomprehensible logic. "The hell did you say? I was being kind, you know, offering to make you my woman!"

"I can do without your kindness, Mr. Castel Sagotez," Zaystall said firmly and then continued addressing him without even a hint of a stutter. "Furthermore, up until now, you have abandoned or failed to fulfill seven consecutive missions. Of those failures, we have determined that none of them were the result of unforeseeable, unavoidable circumstances—despite your own best efforts. Are you aware that should you fail or abandon any more missions, you will be demoted from Rook to Pawn rank?"

"Huh? What are you talkin' about? No one told me anything about demotion! Screw you!"

"This policy is stated very clearly in the guild charter. And even if it weren't, it's simply common sense to expect your reputation to be damaged if you keep failing the jobs you're given."

"Then you need to do *your* job, saving me when I'm in trouble and smoothing things over! I might not look it, but I'm a noble!" the hunk—Castel Sagotez—yelled back.

"By the way, if I were to report what you said just now, you would most certainly be demoted."

Apparently, this was the first time Sagotez had heard about this rule, but when he'd pressed Zaystall, the male receptionist had snapped back coolly.

Incensed by his attitude, Sagotez cried, "I'll teach you not to mouth off, you bitch!"

Sagotez then thoughtlessly raised his fist to hit the feminine man.

Zaystall responded by dodging the punch Sagotez threw his way before grabbing the man's arm. The receptionist slammed him into the floor with a flawless judo throw.

Whoa. Isn't that what they call a counter-throw?

Zaystall looked down at Sagotez, who was now groaning on the floor. "Besides, as I keep telling you, I'm a man," he said softly.

I've heard people say that beauties are scary when they get angry. Looks like they were right.

The feminine receptionist then went behind his counter and took some documents out of his desk before coming out from behind the counter again to hand the documents to me.

"Please fill out these required fields and return these forms to me. Once I've

processed them, I'll give them back to you. When you arrive at the basement-level firing range, please hand them to the receptionist there."

After beaming at me radiantly, he returned to his counter once more.

"Next person, please," he said, resuming his duties with a smile.

At the basement firing range at the Ittsu Branch of the Mercenaries Guild, it was possible to practice shooting and sniping up to a distance of one hundred meters. Fifty people could practice firing at the same time here, but today, the range looked sparsely populated.

Firing my ship's cannons was one thing, but my marksmanship on the ground was pretty poor.

Though this lack of skill wasn't my only reason for doing so, I had selected the most popular and most affordable firearm for my own use. I had a P-11 blaster made by the Tatelebum Company with adjustable power settings. This blaster was also known as the Mulbiera.

Before entering the range, I presented the forms that Zaystall had processed for me to the receptionist there first. These forms were necessary to complete my mandatory target practice. For any other regular visit to the range, I would have only needed to speak with the receptionist.

Incidentally, these forms had been printed on plasti-paper, and once I handed them to the receptionist, they would be filed away and stored in a safe.

You may wonder why they still used paper forms in this day and age. Apparently, in the past, some idiot who hadn't wanted to do his mandatory target practice had hacked the guild's systems to falsify his own records. As a result, they'd ended up switching back to this system. They'd essentially figured that if they used paper, their records could never be hacked. Our job application forms were printed on plasti-paper in much the same way and were also stored in safes after they'd been filed.

Once I was done with the paperwork, I went to my assigned booth. There, I inspected my gun, acquired a spare magazine, and put on a pair of earmuffs. After that, I announced to the voice-activated console installed in my booth

that I was ready to begin my target practice session.

When the program commenced, my first target appeared about twenty-five meters away.

During this session, I was required to fire one hundred rounds. I had to see how many points I could get, and the highest possible score was ten thousand points. It wasn't as if I'd be penalized for receiving a low score, and there was no time limit either, so it was a fairly relaxed challenge.

I was very familiar with my own skill level, so I maintained a relaxed attitude as I repeatedly pulled my gun's trigger.

I ran out of ammo after firing thirty rounds, so I changed magazines. But as I was doing so, the lamp in front of me suddenly lit up.

Since it was impossible to hear what was going on around you while wearing the earmuffs, the range had a rule that you had to signal to someone when you wanted to talk to them by switching on their lamp. Honestly, it was just good manners too.

I removed my earmuffs only to be met with a sudden torrent of abuse.

"Hah! What are you even doing? It looks like you're just barely hitting the targets. You have some nerve calling yourself a mercenary with your clumsy shooting skills, you ugly bastard!"

This voice belonged to Mr. Hero, aka Yuri Puliliera. Everything he'd just uttered made him sound like a condescending, incendiary jerk from some sports manga, or maybe a coming-of-age one. He was looking to provoke someone who was clearly far weaker than himself to fight him, wanting an opportunity to say something to the effect of "Let me show you what real skill looks like!"

So, in return, I said, "I'm in the middle of completing my mandatory target practice. Please don't interrupt me."

I thought it would be best to nip that whole exchange in the bud and simply not talk to him, but he wasn't deterred.

"I'm way better than the likes of you! Go up against me, and I'll show you

what I can do!" he said.

"I'm really not interested in seeing what you can do, so I'll pass," I said.

Of course, that wasn't enough to put him off either.

"Hmph! Scared you'll lose?" he shot back. "Well, that's to be expected! You're a coward, after all!"

Mr. Hero had been shamed for his big sister's transgressions, and other mercenaries had said all kinds of hurtful things to him. He'd clearly been working hard to wipe the slate clean, but it didn't seem to be working.

A little bird did tell me that he was really beginning to act out... He's getting to be a real pain in the ass.

That being said, I have no intention of engaging with him.

"Yeah, yeah. I sure am a coward, aren't I? Let's just say that you win," I offered.

I was ready to ignore anything else that he had to say. I picked up my earmuffs in order to get back to my target practice and finish firing my required hundred rounds.

He didn't seem to appreciate the cold shoulder I was giving him, though, and he started to insult and goad me even more aggressively.

"Why, you... Don't you have any pride as a mercenary? I'm stronger than you! And I'm telling you that I can prove it!"

I figured he was so anxious to compete with me because of his present circumstances. He saw this as an opportunity to wipe away the shame he was experiencing.

Be that as it may, I'd really like him to pick a less annoying method.

"I'm sure you know this, but it's not like beating someone ranked higher than you in a contest will allow you to climb to that person's rank, right?" I asked. "And even if there were such a system, why are you challenging me, someone you've decided is beneath you? If you think you're stronger than me, go challenge someone better. Go and face off with Mr. Albert Sirclud, the so-called Ebony Devil. Isn't what you're doing now exactly what a coward would do?

Picking a fight with someone weaker than you?"

I'd intended my words to serve as revenge for everything he'd done to me up till that point. I also wondered if he might finally snap and throw a punch my way.

After glaring at me, the red-faced Mr. Hero turned on his heel and left the firing range without another word.

Looks like he still has some concept of shame, but the fact that I was holding a gun might have had something to do with it...

I put my earmuffs on again and continued my target practice.

### NPC No. 35: "My job as a receptionist is to help mercenaries find work. I would never simply turn you away."



Aside: Yuri Puliliera

This stings...

This really, really, really, really stings!

I can't believe I had no comeback for that guy. He's clearly weaker than me!

I had found myself in the worst circumstances imaginable.

My big sis had committed some truly heinous acts without my knowledge. Once everyone had found out about her crimes, she had fled the Mercenaries Guild to avoid arrest. Now, she had a bounty on her head, and everyone thought I was a cheat, just like my sister.

I'm still only ranked Pawn, for God's sake!

So, I now found myself needing to find a way to bolster my accomplishments without cheating.

But though I tried to find more work to improve my record, since the incident with my big sis, all the girls in reception had started to treat me harshly out of nowhere. They wouldn't even let me apply for a job.

I was starting to feel anxious, and that was part of the reason I was going around and picking fights with a bunch of different guys.

My attempt to start a fight with that dorky bastard was all part of that chain of events.

I knew it was pointless.

I could tell that going around and starting fights wouldn't accomplish

anything, even if I won.

But as I remembered that dork's words, I became pissed off all over again as I headed to the lobby where the reception desks were.

Of course, as I set foot in there, the receptionists all reacted. Some got up from their chairs while others averted their eyes from me. The employees obviously had no intention of letting me apply for a job.

It was at that moment, however, that one of the receptionists called me over.

"Right this way, sir."

She was small in stature and looked frail. She had blue eyes and long, shiny, blonde hair that she wore in a single braid.

Having never seen her before, I had to assume she was new here, but there was no way that she hadn't already heard the rumors about me. And if I was really unlucky, this might even be some kind of ambush. Or maybe the other lady receptionists might have subjected her to some kind of punishment game and were forcing her to work with me.

But I was desperate enough for work that I was willing to grasp at straws!

"I'd like a job..." I said.

"May I check your rank?"

"Sure."

As directed, I held my Wrist-Com up to the auto-checker.

"Pawn rank, I see... Here are the job offers available to you."

There were a lot of different jobs on the list she showed me. Of course, they were all listed at Pawn rank.

But with my abilities, I should be able to take on the same jobs as that dorky bastard. No, I should be able to handle even higher-ranked ones!

"Show me the jobs for King rank."

She looked shocked. "If I do, what will you do with that information?" she asked as her expression turned suspicious.

"I'll take one of those jobs and show everyone what I'm capable of!" I announced sharply.

But this was met with a response that I really should have expected.

"Unfortunately, I cannot do that," she told me.

"Why not?"

"There are no jobs available at King rank. Job offers at that rank are rare in the first place, so they are all fulfilled by King-ranked mercenaries almost as soon as they're advertised. They disappear almost immediately."

Well, I guess they do call it King rank...

"Then show me some Queen-or Bishop-ranked missions!"

"I can't do that."

I thought that if King-ranked ones were out of the question, I'd try asking for jobs ranked below that, but that request was swiftly dismissed too.

I knew it, more harassment.

She had deliberately given off the air of someone who might actually let me apply for a job only to reject me at the last second.

This really takes the cake! I thought, and I was about to start yelling at her before I suddenly thought better of it.

What was I thinking?

Of *course* she wouldn't let someone ranked as a Pawn take a job for mercenaries ranked at Bishop or Queen, let alone King.

I finally accepted that reality and sighed heavily.

Then, with a serious expression, she said to me, "I'm aware of what's happened to you. But if you're already on thin ice, this isn't the time to be making unreasonable demands. You should focus on performing well in the kind of jobs that are currently available to you."

"But I don't even know where my next job is coming from..." I said. Her assertion had shaken me so much that I had to voice my concerns.

"My job as a receptionist is to help mercenaries find work," she said. "I would never simply turn you away."

In other words, she was actually going to help me.

I felt myself start to tear up.

After the incident with my big sis, nearly every receptionist had abruptly started to give me the cold shoulder.

She alone had extended me a helping hand.

"Thank you! I'll... I'll work really hard!" I couldn't help but burst into tears as I clasped her hand between my own hands.



After finishing my target practice and returning to the reception hall, I found Mr. Hero looking for work at Zaystall's counter.

Though this scene would have appeared to anyone to be a handsome young mercenary doing business with a beautiful female receptionist, they were both men...

Because of the incident with his sister and the way he'd acted out since then, the calculating receptionists who had once been kind to him seemed to no longer want anything to do with him.

Yep. I know how much that sucks. I started getting that kind of treatment the moment I signed up with the guild, and nothing's changed since.

Zaystall must be the first out of all the girls—well, all of the workers in reception, at least—to actually help him out in a while.

And so Yuri had grabbed the feminine receptionist's hand tightly as tears streamed down his own cheeks.

Y'know, I think that Old Man Lohnes would have been just as helpful...

Some of the girls in reception looked away from this emotional scene while others glared at them.

I wonder if the ones shooting daggers at him are the ones who've been giving him the cold shoulder. There sure are a lot of them... Maybe six out of every ten.

I guess the ones looking away feel a little ashamed about something.

At the same time, there were some girls whose eyes shone to see this touching exchange between two guys. The women were staring so hard at them that I thought they might bore a hole in space-time—they were breathing so loudly that I thought they might be hyperventilating. That crowd of ladies wasn't just made up of workers, but mercenaries too.

Should I be worried about the state of the Mercenaries Guild?

And, just as I expected, there was a group of men glaring at Mr. Hero as well.

Figures. Those protagonist-type guys always have an event waiting in the wings that'll help them crawl back up from rock bottom.

When I'd finished my business at the guild for the day and headed out the door, it was past one in the afternoon. I hadn't had lunch yet, so I decided to buy something at a convenience store and head straight home.

You'd better believe I'm not going to wander around. I'd just bump into someone or something.

On my way home, a familiar face appeared on a billboard-sized screen.

"Miss Nosweil! Congratulations on winning this year's Star Clusters Cup!"

"Thank you very much."

That face belonged to a fellow survivor of an incident I had gotten caught up in back when I was a student. She was Scuna Nosweil, who was now an ace pilot for the Planet Racing team Crystalweed. It sounded like she had just won a race too.

"This year's race was a grueling course through the Flintlock Belt. How did you find it?" the other person on-screen asked her.

"The Flintlock certainly is dangerous, but at least no one was shooting at me."

"I see! Just as one would expect, racers who have experienced a real battle are a different breed."

It looked like Nosweil was hard at work too.

With a sigh of relief that I hadn't stumbled into the *real* Nosweil, I hurried home.

To kick off my vacation, tomorrow I'll start with an anime marathon!

### NPC No. 36: "To create a remote-controlled humanoid body for myself, of course."

It was the day after I had witnessed the moment that Mr. Hero had snapped out of his depression, and for the first time in a while, I was able to spend my entire day in a manner that I found fulfilling.

After waking up and having breakfast, I set my washing machine to run before cleaning my room and throwing out the trash.

By the time I had finished cleaning, the laundry was also done, so I folded it up and put it away in my dresser.

I then went out to buy food for that day, and when that was finished, it was finally time for my anime marathon.

I'd been saving the movie release of *Demon Killer* for this, as well as the series *Jusatsu Rensen* and *The Pharmacist Murmurings*. I watched them all in one sitting.

However, I knew all too well that after this glorious first day of my vacation, I would spend half of the next day in a state of melancholy.

I was happy to be getting my ship back, of course, but that meant I'd have to go and dock it in the guild's hangar. This usually wouldn't have bothered me, but the fact that Old Man Lohnes wouldn't be there was enough to make me worried—and that seemed pretty messed up.

In the worst-case scenario—meaning if Lohnes were to quit or be dismissed—I knew that Zaystall would be capable of performing the same job in his place, so I could always go to him for help. It just seemed like I could expect a number of adverse reactions when I did.

It wasn't as if there were no other male receptionists, but there were only a few of them, and they were almost all handsome guys. I usually found female mercenaries clinging to them, so I'd never gotten the chance to speak to them.

But if I'm just going there to dock my ship, I'll only have to talk to the person managing the hangar and fill out some forms.

The next day came, and I went to Dolg Repair Shop to pick up my ship.

"Howdy," I called out.

"Hey, your ship's ready. Fee's the same as always," said Dolg—he was busy repairing something else.

"Now then, please follow me to settle your payment," a female voice said.

"Ah, sure."

Since Pops was busy, his wife had emerged to handle the payment process in his place.

Despite the fact that most people in the neighborhood—his fellow mechanics included—had given him the nickname Dwarf because of his short stature, muscular physique, prominent belly, and bushy beard, his wife was still an indisputable beauty, despite getting on in years.

When she was young, she must have been pretty popular. But I had been told that, before they started their relationship, *she* had pursued *him*.

As I was paying, Pops suddenly dropped a bombshell.

"Oh, right. It looks like the company that manufactured your ship's engine has stopped making them. Once I've burned through my stock of spare parts, you might want to think about replacing it."

"Huh?! But they held out for so long... Still, it's not like I can build my own engine."

"Then try not to break the one you have, yeah?"

I had originally bought my ship, the Patchwork, from this very shop. It'd been sitting here as a used item. After I'd obtained a bunch of different parts to make up for those that were missing and added new ones to reinforce what had already been there, I had finally assembled my own ship.

That being said, a ship's engine was the one place where you couldn't afford to cut corners. It needed to be repaired with only genuine components. So, if

anything ever happened to render it inoperable, I'd have to replace it, just as Pops had said.

Guess I'll need to be even more careful from now on.

After picking up my ship from Pops's shop, I took it straight to the guild's hangar.

"This is ECIM-98702, John Ouzos. Requesting permission to land."

"This is the control tower, Mercenaries Guild Ittsu Branch. Permission to land granted. Bring her down at J-910."

"Roger."

Once I'd landed my ship as directed, one of the crew members on the ground spoke up to me.

"Seriously, thanks, man. You can really tell when someone's actually capable."

"Nah. I'm perpetually ranked as a Knight, you know."

The crewman had complimented me, but I gently contradicted him.

He shook his head. "Rank's got nothing to do with it."

Then his expression turned serious, and he launched into a speech.

"Those of us working here in the hangar decide where ships should dock based on the number of ships coming in, convenience, and ease of landing and takeoff. Truly capable mercs understand these constraints and always bring their ships down *exactly* where we tell them to—and they land them beautifully too. However, we also see less skilled mercs, and while they *do* land where we ask them to, they don't manage to do it so smoothly. Then there are the cocky ones who don't even land where we say to. They'll insist on landing in a bay with the number that *they* like, or one that's got their lucky numbers. But someone like the Ebony Devil—or even our own aces like the Winged Helmet and Léopard? They always land smack-dab on the spot where we instruct them to land."

It looked like the crew in the hangar really had their work cut out for them.

"In that case, why not spread the word about that?" I suggested.

If more people were to hear the hangar crew's point of view, surely they would compete to show off their skills. They wouldn't only follow instructions, but they'd try to land smoothly as well.

However, the crew member shook his head once again.

"These are just the arbitrary standards we use to manage this facility. If those same uncooperative flyboys learned who spread the word in the first place, they'd stop listening again."

The crew member then gave me a sad smile. I got the impression that maybe they'd tried starting that very rumor in the past, and perhaps they'd ended up being ignored for the very reason he'd just suggested.

After finishing up in the hangar, I was still going to need to pass through the guild branch building to leave.

As long as no one bothered me, it'd be a piece of cake.

But I wasn't about to be so lucky.

Suddenly, I heard my Wrist-Com start ringing as a call came through.

I quickly moved to a couch in a secluded corner, sat down, and answered the call.

By the way, it was Rossweisse who was calling me.

Well, that's a relief. At least it isn't a flesh-and-blood human.

"Hello? What's happening?" I asked.

"It's been quite some time, Captain Ouzos. I have a little request for you today."

"I've got a really bad feeling about this, so I'll have to refuse."

Whatever Rossweisse's request was, it couldn't have been anything sensible.

"But why?" she said. "I haven't even told you what it is."

"For some reason, I've just got a bad feeling about it."

"Please, at least listen to what I have to say!"

"Sure, okay..."

If I were to hang up on her, or even if I were to block her number, I knew she'd still get through somehow. I decided that listening to her would be the quickest way to deal with this nuisance.

"The truth is, I would like to order an android. Would you happen to know any good retailers?"

"I don't know much about androids, so I really only know the big players. And you could easily find that much out by yourself, couldn't you?" I asked.

"In that case, could you tell me the name of someone who might know of some hidden gems?"

Unfortunately, I really didn't know much of anything related to androids. But it wasn't like I was her partner or anything either, so having her consult me was nothing but a nuisance.

"Isn't this the kind of thing you should ask that partner of yours?" I was referring to Mr. Cocky.

"Ah, him? I've got him studying for his promotion exam at the moment."

"Right, he rejected that unconditional promotion offer up to Bishop rank."

"He said that special treatment concerning examinations might be a source of trouble in the future, so he'd like to take the test fair and square."

That's right: Mr. Cocky—aka Lambert Reargraz—had been considered for an unconditional promotion to Bishop rank. He'd reached Knight rank after coming through with a slew of impressive battle results in a very short period of time.

But he'd rejected that offer, saying that he wanted to get that promotion the proper way, by taking the exam. This was already quite a famous story. I was even a little impressed myself, as I'd have never expected him to be such a hard worker.

"More importantly, what are you going to use an android for?" I asked.

"To create a remote-controlled humanoid body for myself, of course."

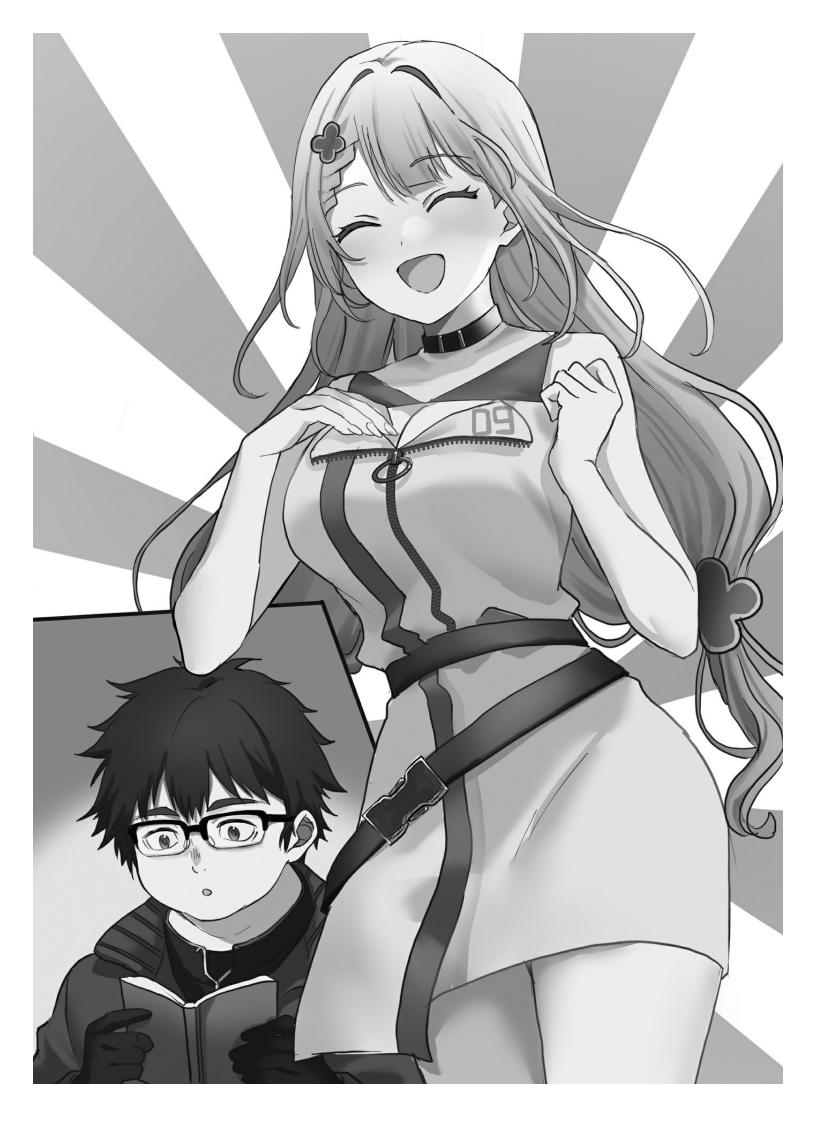
I'd already had a hunch this was what she'd been up to the moment she'd first asked me the question, but hearing it spoken out loud increased my feelings of concern. I was sure that with her knowledge of ancient technology, she could make something incredible, but that kind of thing was definitely way beyond me.

"Anyway... That's not an area in which I can be of any use. I think you'd better look online at some sites related to medical equipment," I suggested. "Medical facilities use androids quite often, so I think you could learn a lot there. Apart from that, you might ask around on sites for people with android fetishes."

"Oh, I see. I'll have a look, then. Thank you very much for the advice. Bye for now."

Rossweisse then hung up the phone.

All I could do was pray that her plans would be delayed somehow. That they would take just a minute longer, or even a *second* longer for them to come to fruition. If she were to have a body and start acting friendly with me in person, it could spell my own doom.



## NPC No. 37: "If we ever find the time, I'd really like for us to go to an arcade. All three of us."

After my phone call with Rossweisse was over, I went to the lobby, intending to go home. However, I suddenly found myself stopped by Arthur.

Seira was walking next to him with a look on her face that declared this to be the most natural thing in the world.

"Why, hello, Mr. Ouzos."

"Hey, Lingard. Oh, and Miss Cynida too. How was the reception?"

I knew that both of them had been invited to a military reception following our recent job together, so I casually inquired about how it had gone.

Whereupon Seira cried out, "I wish we hadn't gone at all!"

Her expression then turned to one of fury.

"All of the men took one look at my Arthur and insulted him, saying things like 'That was a fluke. You just got lucky.' 'I'm stronger than you. Don't get too full of yourself.' Or 'Not bad for a nobody like you. I have to hand it to you!' And just when I thought that was the worst of it, they turned to *me* and started saying, 'How about we go on a date? I'm sure you'll find I'm better than that mercenary jerk.' 'If you become a pilot on my ship, I'll show you a real good time.' And even 'What's a cute little girl like you doing with a mercenary? I'm happy to hire you; just come with me.' Can you believe that? They all sounded like blockhead characters out of some game!"

She ground her teeth as the anger she'd felt for the men who insulted her boyfriend reignited within her.

Then, she continued. "And the women were just the opposite! About me, they said, 'I'd never be caught flirting with men that way,' 'I know I'm better than the likes of *her*,' and 'She's only a low-ranking mercenary. Bet she's really poor.' Their envious, sarcastic barbs were incessant! And they all stuck to my

Arthur like glue—even Captain Hyliat, who was hosting the event!"

Her anger flared up again as she recalled the women who had gotten too close to her boyfriend.

"Now, now, Seira! Calm down," Arthur said. "Besides, if anything, Captain Hyliat shielded me from the worst of it."

"That was just one of her tricks! Of course, it was all right in the end—my Arthur is always honest, a virtuous man! But I'm never going to an event like that again!"

Though Arthur had tried to soothe her, he had unwittingly thrown more fuel on the fire.

"That sounds difficult..." I said.

Good thing they didn't invite me, huh?

Though the core crowd at the party had probably been Captain Hyliat and her acquaintances, I was guessing everyone there had been a noble.

I was proud of the sacrifice these two had made while also feeling great pity for them. However, I was pretty sure Arthur hadn't stopped me just to talk about that.

"So, how can I help you?" I said.

My saying that seemed to remind Arthur of his purpose, which he then proceeded to tell me.

"Oh, right. The truth is, a cleanup job has just been advertised in an asteroid cluster in a sector near Planet Corcos. They say that once they discovered that rare metals could be mined from those asteroids, the lord of the Corcos region ordered a mining effort to be started. However, the cluster is spread over a wide area, so there's been no end to unauthorized drilling. Some entire asteroids have been stolen. As a result, they've opted to collect all the asteroids in the cluster at once so they can melt them and extract the metals..."

As he explained the mission's purpose to me, Arthur sent the job description from his Wrist-Com to mine.

It all sounded pretty sketchy to me, however. Was this mission really

trustworthy?

The lord of Corcos hasn't flown off the handle, right?

"With your radar, it'll be easy for us to maintain a secure perimeter around the worksite as well as detect any incoming asteroids. That would reduce the chances of us colliding with any asteroids, wouldn't it?" Seira added, lending her own support to Arthur's pitch.

"Sorry, but I've only just finished getting my ship overhauled and I'm on vacation right now. It looks like there's still a little time left till the deadline, so I'll make sure to decide before then."

From what they had said, the mission didn't sound suspicious, but I wanted to look into it, just to be safe. But more importantly, I was still on vacation—I wanted to reserve my final answer for later.

"I understand. Well, I hope you can join us. Goodbye for now."

"Yeah, thanks for letting me know."

If I'd been dealing with Mr. Hero, at this point, he probably would have said something like "No, you have to decide whether or not you're taking the mission on now!"

Arthur is a far more decent person, huh? In this respect, at least.

I suspected that one of the receptionists had noticed they didn't have the numbers yet and had asked Arthur and Seira to approach anyone who looked like they might be free...

And so, after finally exiting the guild's premises, I headed straight to the Black Market Shopping District. Naturally, I'd headed there to pick up some information (rumors) at Pattson's Pharmacy.

As always, it presented an appearance that seemed to come from another world. And, of course, the signs put up by another notable shop stood out like a sore thumb.

There was even a new one.

"Witness the source of the spirit that envelops our dead flesh, dancing in the

bubbling grease," it said.

What sketchy new product has that butcher come up with...?

The place seemed to be pretty popular, however, and there was a long line of people who appeared to have thoroughly soaked up its atmosphere.

After giving that crush of people a sidelong glance, I arrived at Pattson's Pharmacy.

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"Sup."

"Welcome... Oh, it's you."
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As soon as he looked up from his newspaper, my friend Gonzales gave me the same treatment as always.

I walked over to the counter and set an envelope on top of it. "I was wondering if you'd heard any rumors lately."

"What kind of rumors?" asked Gonzales.

As he checked the contents of the envelope, I prepared myself to get down to business.

"You know that asteroid cluster in the sector near Planet Corcos? I heard they've found rare metals in the asteroids there, but since they've had so many instances of theft and unauthorized drilling, they've decided to round them all up and melt them for extraction in one go."

That had all been written in the job description Arthur had been carrying with him.

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"Got it. Give me about an hour."
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"Yeah, yeah. I'll keep quiet and wait."

Gonzales plugged a cable into the back of his neck and started investigating, so I sat in a nearby chair and started reading a light novel.

The plan to melt down the asteroids to extract the rare metals was not impossible in and of itself, so that wasn't the problem. In fact, they probably weren't actually going to melt them all at once. They'd probably process them gradually at a steady rate. The thing that concerned me about this mission was

the fact that they were able to extract rare metals from them.

This was just my guess, but those rare metals probably included Leoay ore, or maybe Gystas ore. Leoay was extremely hard and was used to build and armor the hulls of ships. As for Gystas ore, it was used in the barrels of rayguns and blasters because of its ability to resist and dissipate heat.

Radiation wasn't the problem here. Since high-energy particles were always whizzing around outer space, our ships and EVA suits (spacesuits) were already fitted to protect us.

If those asteroids contained corrosive gasses, however, and we happened to get sprayed in the middle of our collection work? We might be screwed.

Asteroids that contained those types of gasses couldn't just be chucked in the furnace either. We'd need to find a way to expel the gasses entirely.

As long as I knew about risks like that, I could equip myself appropriately before starting the job, so it wouldn't be a problem. And even if I happened upon a situation like that without any forewarning, I could just stop working immediately and resume after I'd equipped myself with more suitable equipment. That specialized equipment was pretty expensive, but even general-purpose equipment could provide some level of protection.

In other words, supposing that the asteroids *did* contain corrosive gas, they might be deliberately trying to get us to work there without us knowing. They could have a plan in place for when we'd run into trouble too. There were cases where clients would respond to reports of trouble with "We'll get the proper equipment as soon as we can, so continue working as you are." But in the end, they'd never actually take any precautions and simply hope that we'd finish the work anyway.

I thought Arthur had probably looked into all of that before accepting the mission, so I didn't expect there to be any problems...but I just wanted to be safe.

Precisely one hour later, Gonzales removed the cable from the back of his neck.

The information he'd managed to gather did not in any way differ from the job description, so it looked like there wasn't anything too screwed up about it. At least nothing other than the contents of the client's head—the lord of the Corcos region.

Since we'd finished with our business, I thought I'd bring up a friend of ours.

"Come to think of it, I ran into Senor Klus Arnoid the other day."

"Yeah, he actually came here recently too," Gonzales said.

"Well, you both know where the other's going to be. I have to move around a lot, so I don't see him much."

"Well, in exchange for that, sometimes you make 3 million credits in a day, right?"

"Risking my life, though," I reminded him.

Putting the contents of our conversation to one side, this vibe really reminded me of my school days. Apart from the incident that happened in my first year, I remembered a lot of those days being fun.

While I was reminiscing, Gonzales murmured something suddenly.

"If we ever find the time, I'd really like for us to go to an arcade. All three of us. And Animember after that. I've been too busy to go to the store lately, so I've been getting everything delivered," he said.

But even if we still got along just as well as we had back in school, we couldn't hang out like we used to. Gonzales and Arnoid had their own separate circumstances now, and things they had to do. When I really thought about it, I was probably really lucky to be able to work or take breaks whenever I wanted, though I still had to take responsibility for myself.

"Yeah, absolutely."

If they ever found the time, I'd be sure to adjust my schedule to match.

### NPC No. 38: "I got to see my wife and daughter! Our daughter's so cute! Ah, do you wanna see a picture?"

The day after I docked my ship at the guild's hangar, I went to Animember and Seizaban to dig around for manga, light novels, and doujinshi.

I was rewarded for my efforts with the following pickups:

The latest volume of the light novel *The Somehow Mysterious Summoner's Ring*.

The latest volume of the My Enemy is the Hero manga.

The manga adaptation of the social raising simulation game *Speed Queen! The Planet Racing*.

And a doujinshi based on the social strategy simulation game *Maidens in the Annals of War*. Among some other things, of course.

The day after this rich and varied harvest, Old Man Lohnes was finally back at the guild. That meant I could finally ask for work while keeping my cool.

Though, of course, Zaystall was also going to carry on working in reception.

"Man, my vacation was the best!"

"Glad to hear it."

Lohnes seemed to have had an enjoyable time. His smile extended from ear to ear, and he looked like he had more color in his cheeks too.

"I got to see my wife and daughter! Our daughter's so cute! Ah, do you wanna see a picture?"

"No thanks."

Old Man Lohnes seemed to be a textbook doting father, so I was sure to reject his offer before he could even crack open his photo album.

"More importantly, what were you thinking when you stuck me with your replacement? Zaystall's totally a girl!"

Since he had given me incorrect information, I felt the need to press him on that.

Lohnes's excuse was pitiful. "No, he's a guy, and he's pretty capable, right?"

"He is indeed male, and sure, he seems incredibly capable when it comes to his work, but you didn't tell me he looks like a pretty girl!"

"He looked a bit more like a guy in the photo I saw from his file," Lohnes said. "His hair was shorter, though I guess his face was pretty girly."

In other words, he hadn't been aware of any changes in Zaystall's appearance since the photo in his file had been taken.

I guess that's what happens when you ask HR to pick your replacement...

"Well, since you weren't around, I had no choice but to ask Zaystall to help me look for work..."

That being said, it wasn't ideal for me to only be able to arrange work with Old Man Lohnes. These recent events were forcing me to give that problem more thought, at least.

"So, was anything available?"

"Yeah, I'm going to apply for this," I said, showing Lohnes the details of the collection job in the asteroid cluster that Arthur had told me about.

"This one, huh? Looks all right to me."

These were the details of the job in question:

**Task description:** The collection of an asteroid cluster from a sector in the vicinity of Planet Corcos as well as providing defense in the event of an emergency.

**Task duration:** Unclear. Work will continue until all asteroids in the cluster are collected.

We estimate that this will take 480 standard galactic

hours (approximately 20 days). The minimum acceptable work duration will be 100 hours. You are to take breaks at your own discretion.

Work environment: The contractor will be entitled to the free use of the accommodation facilities available in the adjoining colony, as well as free meals.

Spaceship fuel will be provided.

#### Work conditions:

Contractor must bring their own spaceship.

Contractor will be liable for any repair costs in the event that their spaceship is damaged.

For management purposes, contractor is required to fit their ship with a beacon and a recorder.

In the event of an emergency, contractor is required to sortie and deal with the situation, even during break times.

For the above reason, any contractor who leaves the sector at any point over the duration of this contract will be penalized.

Compensation: 2 million credits (fixed)

If the asteroids are all collected within the minimum work duration of 100 hours, you will still receive the full amount.

**Special Notice:** As it is desirable for the collection to be completed as swiftly as possible, anyone found deliberately prolonging their work will be penalized.

"Well, it would be more accurate to say that we'd just be there to assist the real workers. The bulk of the actual retrieval will be done by debris collectors. Though, of course, we're allowed to collect some ourselves."

Simply put, I guess they just needed more people?

Though we wouldn't get any bonus for doing more work over the required work duration, it wasn't like we had any quotas to fill. There didn't seem to be anything fishy going on behind the scenes, so it looked like it might actually turn out to be a fairly laid-back mission.

However, there was one thing that had been bugging me ever since Arthur had told me about it...

"Why did they write this part about what happens if the work is finished within the minimum 100 hours when they expect it to take 480?"

"There are some people who are really particular about details like that, so I'm guessing they had to address it," Lohnes explained. "After all, it might happen, even if it's an outside chance."

Incidentally, that minimum work duration meant that we would each have to work for at least that many hours.

If we were only thirty minutes under, or even an hour, we might have our pay reduced. However, there were cases in which such a discrepancy would result in the compensation being withheld entirely.

"So, are you taking it on?"

"Of course."

At the very least, it had to be less stressful than a mission that was mainly combat-focused.

After accepting the job, I headed straight for the Corcos sector. By the time I arrived, it was already evening.

I received instructions for docking at the cylindrical colony that had been brought to accompany the work crew—or, more accurately, the colony had been dragged there. Work was scheduled to begin tomorrow, so we were encouraged to take this opportunity to rest up.

Incidentally, two out of the three habitable sides of this colony were hangars. The remaining side housed its offices, accommodation facilities, welfare facilities, repair docks, gas stations, and a variety of warehouses.

After landing my ship, I made my way to the accommodation facilities. On my way there, I met the old debris collector I'd worked with before.

"Ah! Hey, gramps!" I called out.

"Oh! Aren't you the kid from that last job?"

When I heard that debris collectors would be doing the bulk of the work, I did think I might run into him, but I was still thrilled to see him again.

"I thought you might be working here."

"We got the request from the Corcos government. Well, collection's the name of the game here, so there are plenty of guys here besides me," he said.

"So this'll be similar to the mission we did before?"

"Yeah. If we were dealing with debris, the amount each person collected would matter, but this time the important thing is to make sure we get it all. Although if we really drag our feet, the client will probably still get angry."

The old-timer, whose name was Riggs Volbard, and I exchanged our contact information. We decided that we would work as a team again this time.

Oh yeah, Arthur and Seira stuck to their word and showed up too.

Though they weren't all over each other, they were still exuding a lovey-dovey vibe. I was sure it'd result in an increased number of guys shedding bitter tears.

The next morning arrived.

During breakfast, a long-winded morning greeting of sorts was broadcast over an open channel and could be heard throughout the facility.

"Erm... Good morning, everyone. We thank you for taking part in this initiative. Our task, to collect all the asteroids in the nearby cluster, is at least simple in its basic procedure. Any asteroids or boulders will first be loaded into specialized collection containers before being aggregated onboard one of our superheavy class container ships. Anything greater than fifty meters in diameter will be towed by tugboat to the vicinity of Guma, a satellite of Planet Corcos. Those will be anchored there before we commence mining operations.

Therefore, your job will be to collect any asteroids or boulders smaller than that. If you find one close to fifty meters in diameter, you can use a high-powered laser to cut it down to size before collecting it. You might therefore wonder, why not cut all of them down to size? Well, we were only able to procure a limited number of high-powered lasers, and we also have a separate objective to expand employment opportunities in asteroid mining by handling the larger asteroids separately. I would like you all to understand that this collection effort itself is being undertaken for the purpose of increasing employment in the first place."

The voice continued.

"Please feel free to refuel your ships or rest at this colony that has kindly come along to accompany this project. Now remember, safety first. If you should become aware of any problems, please report them at once. That being said, we would not be pleased to see anyone dragging their feet, so work swiftly but safely. Please go about your tasks while avoiding accidents. Now then, once you have all finished your breakfast, please get to work!"

### NPC No. 39: "He said that the higher you go, the bigger a pain in the butt it is."

"Hey, kid. The next one's five o'clock, nose-up trim thirty degrees, distance seven hundred."

"Roger that."

Just like that previous mission near that gate, I was piloting my ship at an extremely low velocity—as if I were just about to come in for a landing—and followed all the old-timer's instructions.

I'd applied a polymer coating to my ship, so I was ready for any space gravel that came my way.

We carried on our work seamlessly like we were on an assembly line. Before we knew it, our collection container was full and its contents were ready to be aggregated at the cargo ship.

Though we sometimes had to sit and watch the really huge asteroids get towed away by tugboats, there was something really satisfying about seeing our corner of space steadily become cleaner as all the boulders, rocks, and sand were collected.

"Okay, let's deal with that one next. Ten o'clock, nose-down trim twenty-four degrees, distance six hundred."

"Roger."

I opened my ship's throttle for a mere instant and gradually approached the target. Then, I stopped on a dime, just as the old-timer had instructed me.

We really did seem to be a good match for this kind of work.

#### Aside: Arthur Lingard

I carefully maneuvered my ship's joystick while listening to the debris

collector's instructions.

"Okay. Here is about right."

The debris collector gave me the signal, and I stopped my ship. However, I had fallen quite short of the ideal position.

I'd made so many attempts, but it still wasn't going well.

"Sorry. I was pretty far off."

"I keep telling you, this margin of error is normal. Even for us debris collectors, it takes a long time to learn to stop in the right place."

It seemed that, as far as the debris collector was concerned, where I'd stopped was a trifling matter. Without giving my mistake a second thought, he bounced languidly away from my ship and approached the asteroid to begin his work.

Looking some distance away, I could see Ouzos stop his ship smack-dab in the ideal position.

Wow. He makes that look so easy. I could never.

While I marveled at Ouzos's precise piloting, I adjusted my own ship's position slightly to make things easier for the debris collector.

"Why hasn't Ouzos been promoted?" I wondered aloud. "Considering his ability and his character, it wouldn't be strange for him to be Queen-ranked..."

"He said that the higher you go, the bigger a pain in the butt it is."

While I'd muttered my own doubts to myself, Seira gave me an answer. I had to admit it made a lot of sense.

"That's true. Once you get to Bishop rank, it seems like you have a lot more obligations and constraints," I said.

Once you were Bishop rank with the Mercenaries Guild, more jobs would be available to you, of course, but the compensation for the same jobs could be different than for lower-ranked people.

Although a job like the one we were currently doing paid the same to everyone regardless of rank, when it came to security detail missions like the

one we'd completed a little while ago, compensation for Bishop-rank mercenaries was thirty percent higher, and a greater variety of facilities and services were made available for them.

But, at the same time, there were a greater number of requests that one couldn't turn down at that rank, even outside the typical all-hands special summons that was better known as the Red Slip. Attendance at the guild's end-of-year party was also mandatory. There was no denying that holding that position came with a lot more constraints on your time.

I'd also heard rumors about factional squabbles, and the very idea of that made even someone like me feel sick.

"Besides, it's rumored that the powers that be have only been interested in promoting people they can use for their PR campaigns these days. Those types or anyone related to powerful nobles, at least," Seira continued.

I thought that mentioning that rumor was a little unfair to Ouzos, but having heard him mention his own personal experiences, it didn't sound that unlikely.

"I don't know what to say... Honestly."

I'd always heard that organizations rotted from the head down, but I felt like the decay here was gradually making its way down below already.

I feel like we'll all be in trouble if something isn't done soon, but I guess there's nothing that can be done right now.

"Okay. Take care of this next one. This one's at nine o'clock, nose-up trim fifteen degrees, distance three hundred."

While I was busy talking to Seira, the debris collector had finished with the previous asteroid and was now directing me to the next collection point.

"Copy that!"

Intending to stop in a better position this time, I tightened my grip on my joystick.



The work was really going swimmingly.

The old-timer and I had worked from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. with a one-hour break around noon. In the end, we'd worked ten hours in all with no overtime.

In consideration of the old man's stamina, we were working a rotation with one day off after every five days. This was our thirteenth day out here, and we'd already cleared the minimum work duration requirement.

Unsurprisingly, it had turned out to be impossible to complete the work within the minimum one hundred hours, but work was proceeding at a pretty good pace. There probably weren't more than ten asteroids left that still had to be towed. That being said, it would still take us a while to finish collecting everything.

Incidentally, this project had attracted the interest of the mass media. A TV station had sent a ship to film scenes of the worksite, and reporters were roaming around the colony to conduct interviews.

Obviously, these interviews were reserved for people like Arthur and Seria, who were especially attractive to the eye. They were also after the big shots in management who hadn't done any work on-site.

That being said, their broadcast did give me the opportunity to see some footage of some of the mining work going on at the planetary satellites, which we never would have seen otherwise. We could also see how they selected and extracted the rare metals planetside. It was actually kind of fascinating.

But the bulk of the media's attention was focused on the fact that despite this big project being boring as hell, a King-rank mercenary was participating.

Her name was Malireicht Luihyen Falina, and she was the pilot of the Red Albatross. Her various nicknames included "the Solar Prominence" and "the Crimson Goddess."

She was a statuesque beauty. Her hair was the color of a pigeon blood ruby. Alongside that, she had golden eyes, fair skin, and the kind of dynamite figure that would send professional models running at the drop of a hat.

No one understood why Falina had accepted this job.

I started to notice that Arthur and Seira had given interviews alongside her

pretty often. The number of fans they had on the other side of the camera probably jumped up with each broadcast.

On top of that, a certain noble had come to pay the worksite a visit. He was apparently called Count Sarclus, the lord of Planet Prosrant.

As rumor would have it, he had a similar asteroid cluster inside of his territory, so he wanted to observe the efforts here for future reference.

Well, guess I'll leave it to big shots to greet big shots. I decided it would be best to focus my attention on retrieving asteroids with this old-timer.

After finishing another day's work (which was day fourteen), the first thing I did upon returning to the colony was get the polymer coating peeled off of my ship. I was still using the same kind that I'd used last time. Naturally, the stones and sand that were stuck to it could also be sent for material extraction.

After that was done, I inspected my ship and fuelled up, and with that, my work was complete for the day.

I had dinner in a restaurant, and after purchasing a few items from a convenience store inside the same building, I headed back to the hotel area. There were already some people getting drunk in the lobby here, but since I could never handle booze, I wasn't going to partake. Besides, it wasn't like I knew anyone in their group.

On my way, I noticed there was a crowd gathering in the cafeteria. I spotted a TV crew in the group, so they were probably interviewing someone.

I watched from a safe distance and saw someone who seemed to be the nobleman I'd heard about. He was a stern-looking older fellow with a beard and was waxing lyrical about something.

"Therefore...I am seeking capable people to work in my territory. Those who think themselves worthy candidates..."

It sounded like he was just wrapping up his interview and was using the opportunity to try and recruit people for his own project.

I didn't want to be a stooge for a nobleman if I could help it, so I wasn't even remotely interested.

After walking swiftly away from there, I was nearly back at the hotel when I noticed another crowd.

The cause of that commotion was the King-ranked mercenary the Crimson Goddess.

It wasn't as if she'd committed any blunder herself, however. It was just that some mercs who wanted to get close to her had decided to corner her as she came out of her hotel room.

Of course, I didn't want to get caught up in the same commotion, so I ignored them completely and headed to my own room.

I was staying in a single, much like the kind you might find in a business hotel. Though I felt more at ease in a capsule hotel, all of the accommodations available in this colony were of the same type, so I didn't have much choice.

After changing into something more comfortable, I took out a light novel I'd brought with me, flopped down on my bed, and started reading from the place I'd gotten to yesterday.

#### NPC No. 40: "Ah, but I might already be gone by then."

While Ouzos was hard at work gathering those asteroids...



#### Aside: Fialka Tielsad

I made my way to the reception lobby in the Mercenaries Guild, intending to find some work.

When I had first become a mercenary, I would direct my requests to any receptionist who didn't seem busy, but the men had often responded by hitting on me and the women had been sarcastic more often than not. In all honesty, I found it pretty aggravating.

But there had still been some among them who had seemed all too happy to provide me with the proper assistance. I eventually decided that I would inquire at the desks of such receptionists whenever possible.

Nowadays, I had more or less decided that one woman in particular would be my dedicated receptionist. Her name was Meeya Aushima. She had vivid blue eyes like sapphires and wore her emerald-colored hair in a side ponytail. She also boasted a bust that even made me jealous as a woman myself.

Of course, there were other workers there I could trust, but not only was she capable, I suppose you could say we were on the same wavelength. So, whenever possible, I would go to apply for jobs and collect payments when she was working. I did that even though part of me knew this was me being inflexible, which was not a desirable quality.

Since Meeya was both beautiful and a conscientious worker, she had many fans, men and women alike. There were usually at least a few people waiting in line at her desk, but no one was there today, so I was able to walk right up and talk to her without missing a beat.

"Hey, Meeya. Anything good on the job board?"

"You've received a few personal requests to guard the *usual suspects*..." she said.

"Pass."

"I thought so. Let me get rid of those."

As I sat down in a nearby chair, Meeya deleted a few of the job requests listed for me.

The requests that had named me personally had all come from idiot sons of nobles who wanted to get close to me. They also came with a number of unbelievable requests that made me doubt their sanity. "Must allow me to lay my head in her lap." "Must come wearing an outfit of my choosing." And at the end of the day, most of them named "My bed" as the worksite.

From the guild's point of view, such requests were considered to be out of line even if they came from nobles, so there wouldn't be any repercussions for them to delete them.

Then, when she showed me the updated list, there were plenty of decent requests for bodyguards or security personnel. I did notice, however, that there were a few requests to exterminate pirates scattered among them.

"Am I mistaken, or wasn't the military engaged in that desperate pirate hunt?" I asked.

Since the military had recently redoubled their efforts to eliminate piracy, it was rare to see requests for mercenaries to deal with them.

"These are from this morning. If you don't take one of them soon, the military will likely take care of it first."

It appeared that these were all rather small bands of pirates that the military had overlooked, probably because they weren't very large at all.

As long as I can find them, they won't be a match for me, so it shouldn't take too long to detain them. If anything, it sounds like finding these groups will take the most time.

"All right, I'll go with this one then," I said. Then, I ran a quick simulation of

the mission in my head. "Hmm... I see... I bet I can wrap this one up in two or three days!"

But when I heard Meeya's reply, I could hardly believe my ears.

"Ah, but I might already be gone by then."

"Huh?"

I was shocked beyond words, and a number of thoughts raced through my mind.

Has she found a new job? Perhaps she's getting married and giving up her job? If so, when's the wedding?

I trusted her as a partner in my career, and though she's a little older than me, I thought she was my friend... Did she really get engaged without even telling me?

"I'm attending my cousin's wedding, but because they're having it on another planet, it'll actually take a while for me to travel there and back. I'm taking a bit of a long paid vacation. Knowing you, Fi, you probably really will be back in two or three days, so chances are high I'll still be away, you know?"

"Oh, is that all? You surprised me."

Now that Meeya had properly explained her situation, I was able to breathe a sigh of relief. And in case you were wondering, whenever we weren't acting formally with each other, she'd been calling me Fi for a while now. But when I had tried to do the same thing and called her Mee, she had told me to stop, saying that it sounded like a noise a cat might make. She had seemed genuinely upset, so I didn't do it anymore.

Putting that to one side, the problem remained that I didn't actually know who I could ask about work apart from her.

"Well, Meeya, if you're not here when I get back, I'll ask someone else," I announced.

"Please do. I can share your data with other receptionists, so nothing should get in the way of the application process."

Thus, I accepted the pirate hunting job and exited the Mercenaries Guild.

At the time, I didn't pay much attention to the fact that a crowd had formed around another reception desk...

In all honesty, I had no trouble apprehending the pirates. The initial search was the part that took the most time.

To sell off the pirates' ships following their arrests, I made my way to the reception lobby. After a quick look around the lobby, I saw that Meeya wasn't there, just as I'd expected.

Though I'd known beforehand that she wouldn't be here, I still felt a little dejected.

In an effort to be more flexible, I thought I would approach someone else, but I couldn't decide who. While I was hesitating, I saw someone who looked like they'd just returned from their break sit down at one of the counters.

Having never seen this person before, I figured this feminine receptionist must be new and decided to talk to her.

"I'd like to do the paperwork for a mission I've just completed. Could I ask you to help me?" I asked.

"Of course. Please, step right forward. First, I'd like to confirm your identity."

I held out my Versitool to be checked.

"Miss Fialka Tielsad, I see," the receptionist said. "You would like to register the arrest of the Desbua Brothers pirate band and sell their seized battlecraft, correct?"

After checking my ID, she perused the data that Meeya had shared with her. "The job itself pays 450,000 credits. The sale of the three battlecraft together will yield an additional 1.23 million credits. Your total compensation will be 1.68 million credits. Does that sound right?"

"Yes. That sounds correct."

"Would you prefer cash or data money?"

"Data, please."

"Understood. Please wait one moment."

With quite a bit of finesse, she made the necessary preparations to hand me my compensation. This receptionist wore her pretty blonde hair in a single long braid, and though she had no bust to speak of, there was no doubt that she was a beauty—that I could say without hyperbole. Plus, she seemed to be hardworking and skilled. She was sure to have a promising career in the guild!

Now, don't they usually wear a nameplate...? Ah, there it is. Alphonse Zaystall, huh? Looks like I'll have to remember that name!



# NPC No. 41: "Huh? Hey! Imperial City TV! We just told you that all noncombat personnel are to retreat to the colony!"

After I spotted that nobleman and the Crimson Goddess on the fifteenth day of the contract, I was able to continue my work in peace without any more near misses of getting involved with anyone like that.

Then the morning of the nineteenth day arrived.

While I was getting ready to launch along with the old-timer I'd partnered up with, an awfully energetic all-hands announcement from the client was broadcast.

"Erm... Good morning, everyone. Thanks to your tireless efforts, we anticipate finishing collecting the last stray asteroids from the cluster today. Therefore, assuming that nothing out of the ordinary happens and the work is completed today, you are welcome to collect your certificates of completion before spending one more night in the colony. Tomorrow morning, you may return to your homes. As for your payments, we have already transferred them to the locations where you each applied for your contracts, so please collect them there. Mining operations on the asteroids so large they had to be towed are still underway—along with the extraction and refinement of various metals, including those crucial rare metals—but once the retrieval work is complete, that will represent a significant step forward for our efforts. Fortunately, there have been no severe accidents or injuries during this operation. Now, I hope you'll all stay focused during this final sprint!"

I already knew that there weren't too many asteroids left, but hearing that our goal was in sight was still quite moving.

"So just one more push, huh? Guess I can finally have another drink tonight," said the old-timer.

Because alcohol could affect his judgment while he was out collecting, he'd made a habit of abstaining from drinking except on nights before he had a day off. I guess I should have expected as much from a pro.

About two hours after the old-timer and I had started our work, we received an emergency transmission.

"Alert! Alert! An unidentified convoy is currently approaching our position. As they have refused to allow us to confirm their hull codes, we assume they're pirates. All noncombat personnel, retreat to the colony at once. All mercenaries currently on break must prepare to engage. Any mercenaries currently on duty who need to refuel are to return to the colony, refuel, and deploy again as soon as possible!"

I picked the old-timer up and took him back to the colony immediately.

While a long line of ships proceeded to head back to the colony after the alert, some stayed put.

As long as those ships belong to mercenaries, that won't be a problem, but...

"Huh? Hey! Imperial City TV! We just told you that all noncombat personnel are to retreat to the colony!"

"This is our chance to get footage of the Crimson Goddess in battle! There's no way we're pulling out now!"

"Oh, really?! Well, we won't be responsible for what happens to you!"

A TV crew's ship? This is bad. Maybe this is all in the name of journalism or whatever, but if they're darting all over the battlefield, they're going to get in the way.

After I dropped the old-timer off and returned to the crisis zone, another all-hands transmission came in.

"Calling all mercenaries! I am Malireicht Luihyen Falina, King rank. As I am the highest-ranked mercenary present, I will be assuming command temporarily. Any objections?"

The source of the transmission was the Crimson Goddess's ship, and she was

apparently taking command of our forces for the time being.

I guess King-ranked mercs are a whole other level of cool, huh?

"Those of you with fast ships are to accompany me as I disrupt and intercept the enemy. Any ships that don't fit that description, stick to defense. The military and police have already been contacted, so we just need to hold out till they arrive!"

"Hoo-ah!"

Immediately after she issued her orders, the mercenaries all raised a rousing battle cry.

I guess people in the protagonist camp really do ooze charisma.

With this degree of coordination and fervor, I was sure we could hold out just fine until the military and police arrived.

Naturally, I stuck to defense.

But, to cut a long story short, we could have coped without even contacting the military or the police.

Thirty minutes had passed since combat had commenced.

After the Crimson Goddess started blasting, everyone else got fired up, but her individual exploits were impressive enough on their own. Each time she dashed across the battle zone, she left a trail of disabled and entirely wrecked pirate ships in her wake.

We also had Arthur on our side. To be honest, I felt sorry for the other guys.

That being said, a few pirates still slipped through our front line, so I did everything I could too. In the end, all of the pirate ships had been sunk.

When the military and the police arrived, they captured the pirate band and their ships first. Then they started tallying all our combat scores, which took some time. By the time we were able to resume work, it was already 2:00 p.m.

Because of this, my shift with the old-timer didn't end at 6:00 p.m. as had been scheduled, and the job wasn't all finished until 9:00 p.m. Even so, the

work being fully completed, along with our victory over the pirates, still provoked a round of cheering.

This goes without saying, but regardless of how late it was when we all got back, a party to celebrate our victory and the end of the work immediately began.

I didn't attend, however. After getting my certificate of completion and eating my dinner, I headed straight to my hotel room.

On my way back, Arthur invited me to join him at the party, but I politely declined.

After all, I really can't handle booze.

The old-timer already knew I didn't drink, so when we had returned to the colony, he'd simply congratulated me on a job well done. He had said that he planned to drink the night away with some work buddies.

When I got back to my hotel room, I took a shower and changed into my pajamas. On the TV, there was already a special broadcast in progress about the day's battle, centered on the exploits of the Crimson Goddess.

Oh. There's Arthur and Seira as well.

I was willing to bet that those two would be receiving a lot of personal requests for their services in the future.

The next morning, I steered clear of any crowds and left the colony the first chance I got.

I thought I would find drunks passed out in every corner of the place, but I was surprised to find that it was extremely quiet. There didn't seem to be anyone around. I had already said my goodbyes to Arthur, Seira, and Volbard the night before, so I was all set there. For the sake of admin, I did let one of the colony workers who was awake know before I left.

While it hadn't even taken a full day to travel from Planet Ittsu to Planet Corcos initially, it was going to take me about two days to get back, even if I used a slew of different gates on the return journey. It would have been great if gates worked both ways, but I had no choice but to suck it up.

So after setting off in the morning, I arrived back at my base of operations on Planet Ittsu at 6.30 p.m. the next day.

I stowed my ship in the guild's hangar and simply replenished my fuel.

After that, I walked through the building and headed to the reception lobby. There, I handed my certificate of completion to Old Man Lohnes.

"Long time no see. No doubt about it, you did your job."

"Yeah, though it would have been better if those pirates hadn't shown up," I said. I took the opportunity to complain a little as I watched Lohnes complete the payment process.

"For starters, there's your fixed compensation of 2 million credits. Then, you took out seven pirate ships, which all together were worth 2.84 million. That's a total of 4.84 million. Is data money okay?" Lohnes asked.

Oh, yeah. Though it wasn't stated explicitly in the contract, we're allowed to sell the pirate ships we took out.

As a result, I'd made a lot more than I had expected.

"Let me get forty thousand of that in cash."

As for why I did that, it was because I still needed to go to the bank to transfer one-third of my pay to my parents. If I held back a mere forty thousand, that left 4.8 million, which was easily divided into three 1.6 million chunks. Then, all I had to do was go to the bank and transfer that amount. Maybe I'd do that tomorrow.

As I passed through the lobby, there was an unbelievable news story playing on the TV.

"We've just received a breaking news report. The rare metals that were mined, extracted, and refined from the asteroids recently collected from a cluster near Planet Corcos have been stolen by an unknown party. The police are currently devoting all of their efforts to this investigation..."

They were reporting that the rare metals from the asteroids we had just collected near Planet Corcos had been snatched.

# NPC No. 42: "People mainly go to reunions to catch up with friends they haven't seen in years, but I see my friends all the time."

When Old Man Lohnes and I first heard this news, we froze.

After all, the fruits of a huge workforce's labor—including my own—had just been cruelly stolen.

"Whoever did this had to be pretty bold," said Lohnes.

"Surely they won't suspect those of us who worked to collect the asteroids?" I wondered aloud.

"Well, the heist took place planetside. They aren't stupid enough to suspect the people who were in space for their entire stay there."

"I hope you're right."

To be honest, I was pretty worried. The big shot nobles who had been expecting a big payoff from the sale of the rare metals really might direct their anger at the mercenaries and other workers who happened to be at the worksite. That kind of thing happened a lot.

In the worst-case scenario, the falsely accused would have to search for the real culprit themselves. But that really wasn't in my wheelhouse.

"Just leave it to the police. This isn't something you should stick your nose into," Old Man Lohnes said, gently driving his point home as if he had just read my mind.

"You're right. Well, guess I'll make myself scarce for today. I should get out of here before they ask for their money back."

"I'm sure they wouldn't... Well, actually, they might..."

I'd only said that as a joke—I hadn't thought Lohnes would actually start worrying.

I decided it would be best to hurry away from the guild for now.

When I left, I immediately headed to Gonzales's pharmacy. My objective was to learn more about our elusive phantom thief.

On my way, I thought about buying something from that distinctive butcher. I went into the shop for the first time in a while.

The owner hadn't changed a bit. He was a friendly middle-aged man. But his product lineup all had a...certain character to it.

Beef—Minotaur Meat

Pork—Orc Meat

Chicken—Cockatrice Meat

Ham—Membranes Peeled from Dead Flesh

Croquettes—Golden Bliss

While perusing these options, I wondered just how perplexed the owner wanted his customers to feel. I wasn't just bewildered—I started to become genuinely concerned.

Anyway, I bought four croquettes there, and after picking up a couple of plabottles of tea from the convenience store, I headed to Pattson's Pharmacy.

"Sup," I said, entering the store in my usual manner.

"You want to know about that rare metals heist, right?"

Gonzales, rather than giving me his usual greeting, suddenly guessed exactly what I'd come here to ask him about.

I set the croquettes and pla-bottles of tea on the counter and offered Gonzales his share. "Have you got any information?" I asked.

"Mostly conspiracy theories. There's also some wild speculation that sounds like a plot twist in a manga."

Gonzales picked up one of the croquettes, so I started eating one too. This was my first time eating such a standard croquette, but it really was delicious.

"By plot twist, do you mean something like it all being a flamboyant illusion staged by a great phantom thief? Or perhaps it's just a single incident in a war between a pretty girl thief and a handsome guy thief?"

"Those kinda things, yeah, I guess."

Once he was finished with his first croquette, Gonzales reached for his plabottle of tea.

"Any serious theories?" I asked.

"None whatsoever. Although we can be almost certain that the thief had an accomplice on the inside."

"I think anyone could figure that out..."

It seemed like the informants' network still didn't have any concrete information.

Well, I already decided it would be best not to stick my nose into the investigation, so I think I'll leave it at that.

As he got himself a second croquette, Gonzales asked me a question. "By the way, what are you gonna do about the joint class reunion tomorrow?"

The invitation for my school's joint class reunion had actually been forwarded to me by the Mercenaries Guild on the first day I'd worked on the asteroid collection project.

As for why it was a *joint* reunion, that was because a large proportion of my student cohort had been wiped out during that incident when we had been forced to join a mercenary band. Our school had felt like they couldn't host a reunion for our class on its own. This joint reunion was being held to cater to such former students.

At least, that was their official reason. Everyone knew this was really just an excuse for the administrators to get better acquainted with the heartthrob army major Riol Barnekust and Scuna Nosweil, the famous bombshell Planet Racer.

"I was busy with my collection job when I got the invitation. I didn't feel like going anyway, so I excused myself on the spot."

"Me too. I can already meet up with the friends I actually want to see. Besides, I really don't want to get stuck talking to *that* guy," said Gonzales with a vexed expression.

"Seriously. I bet he hasn't changed a bit."

As for who *that* guy was, he had been in the same class as Gonzales and me in our second year of high school. His name was Arodich Ireblugas, and he had always been at the top of the student hierarchy. Though he wasn't a nobleman, he *was* the son of the president of the Ireblugas Corporation. He was also, of course, very handsome.

Arodich Ireblugas was always surrounded by his cronies, steeped in elitism, and valued vibes above all else. He also loved to fool around, loved to pick up chicks, and loved to one-up everyone else. You could pretty much call him a textbook example of an extroverted asshole.

He was, therefore, not only a nuisance to me, but to every other introvert in the class—no, the whole *school*.

If I told you that I'd much rather see Riol Barnekust again, maybe you'd be able to understand how little I wanted to have anything to do with Ireblugas. At least Major Barnekust wasn't the kind of guy to inflict violence on other people while making light of the situation.

According to the information Gonzales had, Ireblugas was currently studying abroad in preparation to take over his father's company. It sounded like he was living quite the fancy lifestyle.

"People mainly go to reunions to catch up with friends they haven't seen in years, but I see my friends all the time," said Gonzales, opening his newspaper and taking a third croquette.

I took a sip of my tea. "Yeah, I guess you're right," I agreed before popping what was left of my own croquette into my mouth.

Yesterday, when I'd gone to Gonzales to report that I was still alive and kicking, I had been relieved to find that I hadn't received any messages from my client on Corcos demanding their money back.

So today, I decided I would clean my room and take care of other housework until the afternoon, when I'd go take care of my gun for the first time in a while.

Since I almost never fired it, I pretty much only bothered doing any maintenance once a month or right after I used it. I thought that I should really get a professional to check it out every now and then.

The store I trusted with my gun was in the basement of a multitenant building in the city. This shop was called Svanson's Firearms.

"Howdy."

"Welcome! Long time no see."

"Well, I don't use my gun all that much," I admitted.

Inside the store, there was a big, heavy counter protected by thick acrylic plates that were coated to be blast-and laser-resistant. Customers had to make their selections by using a touch screen monitor.

After that, the owner's daughter, Linda, would get them for you. She actually served the customers here. I heard she was still in high school.

Why wasn't she at school now? I guessed that she was a habitual truant.

I didn't see any sign of the owner, so I assumed he must've been repairing or restoring some firearm in the back of the store.

After pushing my gun through the slot on the counter, Linda picked it up. "Looks to me like you're giving it a fair bit of care."

Having said that, she sat down at a desk behind the counter and began disassembling my gun. Unlike me, who always did that slowly, she had the gun in pieces in the blink of an eye. But despite her obvious skill, she told me she still had a long way to go.

While she was working, she suddenly spoke to me. "Say. Have you thought about ordering a custom gun from us?"

"What would someone as clumsy as me do with a custom firearm?"

"Come on, let's build one! You're a mercenary; don't you want one?"

"I don't," I said. "It would be a waste."

Since she had started working the counter here, we'd have this same exchange every time I visited. Apparently, she was really excited by the idea of getting to design and build a gun from scratch. So, knowing that I never carried custom weapons, she always tried to get an order—which would ultimately mean funding for her own project—out of me.

"Even if I were given a custom weapon, I hardly ever use the gun I already have. Mass-produced models are just fine for me."

"Hmph... And I really wanted to test those new materials too..." she sighed as she continued working. I thought the look on her face as she complained was kind of cute.

Just as she finished the overhaul on my gun, the door to the store was thrown open. After that, some customers who I could plainly see would be nuisances walked right in.

### NPC No. 43: "Why, if it isn't Ouzos! What are ya doin' here?"

A small group of well-dressed and well-groomed guys came into the shop, but their faces gave off powerful, petty villain vibes.

Then, as if to direct them, a guy who looked like a petty boss himself walked in.

They were probably all the sons of noblemen. These were the kind of guys who were convinced that their fathers' positions were already their own.

After looking around the inside of the store, they looked at the monitor that displayed the range of products that were available.

"Welcome. Do you need something repaired? Or are you in the market to buy something?" asked Linda. Regardless of how the men looked, as long as they were looking to make a purchase and leave, there would be nothing to object to. She treated them like any other customers at first.

Then, the presumed boss, ignoring Linda, set his eyes on one item in particular.

"Hey, look at that!"

"That's a Kasawa R78!" cried one of his goons. "What a find!"

The item they were discussing was an old military-issue blaster called the Kasawa R78. It was on display in a case behind the counter.

Though the blaster itself was not especially high-powered, it was still highly regarded for its accuracy, ease of operation, and stain resistance. It had also been the favorite weapon of the protagonist of a certain heist movie and had become very popular ever since.

"Hey! Gimme that one," one of them said. "Relax. If it's money you want, I'll pay. I'm very generous, y'know!"

I didn't quite understand why they were talking about being generous when paying money for a product was something anyone would do, but the men seemed to be getting pretty excited.

Are these guys those gun freak types I'm always hearing about?

"I'm very sorry," Linda began, "that one isn't actually for sale; it's just for display. As you can see, the sign says 'Display Item, Not For Sale.'" She explained that she couldn't sell it to them.

But then, of course, the guy who seemed to be the boss of the gang raised his voice.

"Say what?! I just told you I'm willing to buy it."

"As I just explained, that's a display item, not something we can sell," Linda explained in desperation, but the boss did not appear to be listening.

One of his goons slammed his fist against the acrylic plate attached to the counter. "You bitch... Do you have any idea who you're talking to?!"

Although they wouldn't be able to harm Linda while she was behind the screen, I still thought this could get ugly. I got ready to step between them.

As I stepped forward, the door to the back of the store suddenly opened, and the girl's father emerged.

"I'm sorry, sir. You see, this gun is so utterly broken, we can't even repair it. I was only able to repair its outer shell before putting it on display. Take a look."

The owner opened the case containing the Kasawa R78 and then used a tool to take apart the gun.

Once he'd done that, we could all see that the interior was a mess. The parts were all rusted through. Some of them were cracked, and the barrel was just a little bent. Simply put, this gun was a piece of scrap.

"You see?" he said. "Given how famous this model is, the shell alone is worthy of being in a museum. That's why I marked it 'Display Item, Not For Sale.' But if you still want it, I'll happily sell it to you."

The nobleman, who seemed to be the gang's leader, shook with fury. "Who'd want that piece of junk?! I'm leaving!"

Though, given that he didn't rant and rave about having the owner executed for trying to trick him into buying a piece of scrap, perhaps he really *was* generous as far as nobles went.

Once he was gone, Linda sighed with relief and said in exasperation, "Hey, dad. Why don't you take that display down already?"

With a cool expression, her father said, "What are you talking about? They're the ones who have something wrong with them, asking for something I've clearly labeled as not being for sale. Besides, if they really wanted one of these, they'd want it even in that condition. And if anyone actually got their money out after seeing that R78, that's when I'd take *this* one out."

The owner then produced a carefully maintained, still-sparkling Kasawa R78.

"We're really going to get into trouble one of these days. I wish you'd quit it already..." said Linda with a dramatic sigh.

I could only agree with her.

Once my gun was taken care of, I went to Animember to browse and shop for all kinds of things. By the time I was done, the sun was starting to set, so I decided to get dinner before I went home.

Suddenly, a passing air-car honked its horn at me.

What the hell? I thought, turning to look in the direction the noise had come from.

"Why, if it isn't Ouzos! What are ya doin' here?"

The air-car turned out to belong to someone I had never expected to see again. It was someone who lived above the clouds—no, on the other side of the galaxy, or at least on the other side of a TV screen.

It was the ace pilot of the Planet Racing team Crystalweed, Scuna Nosweil. But for some reason, *she* looked a bit surprised.

I was incredibly shocked myself, having thought that I'd never meet her again, but I answered her question anyway. "Nice to see you again, Nosweil. Can I help you? I was just heading home after shopping and running some errands."

"You know that joint class reunion is tonight, right?" she said.

Now I finally understood why she was surprised to see me here.

"Yes. But when I received the invitation, I wasn't sure if I'd be done with work by the event, so I told them I wouldn't be attending. Anyway, I have no friends I'm hoping to catch up with there."

Coming from me, she should have expected this explanation.

While work conflicts were often used as an excuse by working members of society, this was also absolutely true. After all, if I were to suddenly show up after saying I couldn't attend, I'd only inconvenience the hosts and the people running the venue.

Nosweil seemed to understand this. "I see... Well, guess I'll be going then."

"Sure. Please have a good time. Ah, and congratulations on winning the Star Clusters Cup."

"Thanks. Bye, then," said Nosweil with a big grin before whizzing off in her aircar.

Well, someone like her probably will enjoy the reunion. After all, she's a Planet Racing superstar. She won't run out of things to talk about or friends to see, huh?

Now then, time to hurry home and start reading the light novel I just bought.



### Aside: Scuna Nosweil

The place I was headed to—the venue for the joint class reunion—was one of the top five hotels here on Planet Ittsu. It was the high-rise Speras Hotel.

Since every student who had graduated in the 132nd year since Noule Municipal High School's founding had been invited, that added up to a lot of people. The venue was already overcrowded.

"Ah! Why, Miss Scuna has decided to join us!"

No sooner had I entered the venue than I was surrounded by women.

"Congratulations on your recent victory in the Star Clusters Cup!"

"Please tell us about the time you defeated those pirates who attacked an interstellar gate!"

"Is it true that you'll be appearing in the Imperial Girl's Collection?"

"You look fabulous, even in a suit!"

"Aha ha..."

Under these circumstances, I could only manage to force a polite smile.

Ever since I was a kid, I'd always been tall, and after I began middle school, I rapidly grew taller. By the time I graduated from middle school, I'd already more or less reached my current height.

Though I definitely didn't like girls in that way, for some reason, they tended to like me. Even when I tried dressing in a more feminine way, that didn't change. And ever since *that* incident, they seemed even more inclined to surround me like this. I'd even received serious confessions of love from other girls, but since I wasn't inclined that way myself, I had always turned them down.

Guys had confessed to me too, but since I wasn't really interested in romance back then, I recalled having turned them all down too.

This state of affairs hadn't changed since I became a racer, and eighty percent of my fan club was still made up of women.

Even though I'm not a man...

Take a good look! As you can see, I'm wearing a skirt! I'm the same gender as all of you!

If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have taken Aero's advice and worn a dress instead of a suit...

Those were my thoughts as I chatted with the crowd of women around me. But then, a man approached me.



"Hey, Nosweil. I've been keeping a close eye on your career."

He was wearing a suit and tie that looked expensive. He had strawberry blond hair that he'd claimed he was born with.

"Oh, let me see... We were classmates in our third year, weren't we? You are..."

But I really would have preferred not to say his name. That was how much I hated this man. But since he had a nice face and a lot of money, it seemed like he had always been fairly popular ever since we were classmates.

"It's me, Arodich Ireblugas. I'm hurt. I can't believe you don't remember me," said Ireblugas. The awful man approached me with a grin and put his arm around my shoulders without a hint of hesitation.

"I've been so busy with races and my training these days that I don't have a lot of free time. So I've made a habit of forgetting any unnecessary information," I said before gently grabbing Ireblugas's arm and removing it from my shoulders. I put some distance between us.

"Well then, you should take tonight off to relax. I'll keep you company," he said, this time moving his face closer to mine.

Just when I was about to slap him, I heard a crowd of women suddenly start to shriek nearby.

"Long time no see, Nosweil."

The cause of this wasn't Ireblugas's antics, but the arrival of Riol Barnekust, one of only three survivors from the incident where I and a number of other students had been forced to become mercenaries.

As Ireblugas's face drew ever closer to mine, I ignored him. "Long time no see, Major," I said and walked over to Barnekust.

I didn't have a very positive impression of him either, but compared to Ireblugas, who had no trouble being touchy and seeking a relationship with me, Barnekust was still preferable.

"I wish you'd give it a rest with the titles. We're supposed to be classmates and war buddies right now, right?" he asked.

"But as a spokesperson for the military, shouldn't they be more important at an event like this?"

"That's a bit harsh..." Barnekust replied with an uneasy smile, and he moved as close to me as common decency would allow.

I could tell that Ireblugas was glaring at him the whole time. He was probably thinking, *Take your hands off of my woman!* 

I just wanted to get out of this situation as quickly as possible, so I instinctively started scanning the crowds for a friend. I probably should have checked with my friends to see if they would be attending before I agreed to come myself.

I sure hope at least one friend is here. If not...this is really going to suck.

But, thankfully, before too long, I was able to spot some friendly faces.

"Shal! Ronea!" I called out.

"Hey, Scuna, it's been a while. Congratulations on winning the Star Clusters Cup. I heard you caused quite a stir during that pirate battle a while back too."

"I just kind of got caught up in that."

"Still, it's amazing that you managed to survive, isn't it?"

I was talking to one of my friends, Shalra Solreine. She had fair skin and black eyes. Her straight, bright red hair went all the way down her back, and she was dressed in a smart black suit. She'd always had excellent grades in school, and if you can believe it, she was now working in the central bureaucracy in the imperial capital of Hein.

"I heard about how cool you were, Scoo! You swatted those pirates like flies. When I heard how cool my friend Scoo was, I could feel my heart flutter! My daughter was really excited too."

And that was my other friend, Ronea Santreic. After marrying a civil servant in the municipal government office—a man five years her senior named Modesto Orlinis—she had changed her name to Ronea Orlinis. She was now the mother of a four-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy.

Her once-long brown hair was up in a braided bun, and her previously fair skin

was slightly tanned now. But still, her cream-white evening dress brought out her natural cuteness.

"You know I'm a woman, right?" I reminded her.

"If you want to blame someone, blame yourself for being way too cool. Besides, you're not even wearing a dress—that suit matches your hairstyle," said Shal as she took some drinks from a nearby waiter. She handed one each to me and Ronea.

"But you're cool too, Shal, and you were always popular with boys, not girls."

Back when we had been in school together, Shal and I had both been considered cool. For some reason, she was always popular with just the boys.

"If you want to talk about someone who the boys liked, look at Ronea. She got more than her share of confessions and love letters. She even got a long string of *billets-doux* on plasti-paper. She turned them all down, of course..."

"Well, there weren't any boys cooler than my darling Scoo back then." Ronea then took a sip of her drink, looked at me, and giggled.

"All that being said, you were pretty quick to get married," I commented.

"Well, my darling Moddee turned out to be even cooler!"

Ronea had gotten married as soon as she graduated from junior college. I'd actually only met her husband, Modesto Orlinis, at their wedding.

"I couldn't be with a hulk like that..." Shal said. "But, well, I have no doubt that he's a hard worker and a decent man."

Just as she'd said, Modesto was muscular and even taller than me. I remembered thinking what a kindly face he had.

While I was reminiscing with them, I suddenly heard an announcement from the organizers of the joint class reunion.

"Greetings to all of you who were able to attend. We apologize profusely for keeping you waiting for so long. At this moment, we would like to declare that the joint class reunion for the 132nd graduating year of Noule Municipal High School has officially begun."

This year, I was able to forget about racing and other ambitions for one night while seeing some of my friends and having fun.		

# NPC No. 44: "Back in the day, cases like that were rampant. We have our previous and present imperial majesties to thank for changing that."

As luck would have it, after my encounter with Nosweil, no police officers had come bursting into my room to arrest me after I had gotten home, so I was able to go to the Mercenaries Guild the next day to look for work.

There were a surprising number of requests to eliminate groups of pirates on the job board.

At first, my reaction was I thought the military was working really hard to eradicate pirates right now...

But after looking at the details of these requests, it all made sense. A slew of larger pirate bands had been defeated, so the smaller bands' activities were starting to stand out.

There was a request to deal with a group of pirates whose total damages added up to a particularly small figure and who didn't look all that vicious. I picked it up and presented it to Old Man Lohnes.

"Sup. I'd like the details on this one."

"From the look on your face, I'm guessing you weren't asked to return your payment for the last job or suspected of any involvement in the heist," said Lohnes with a grin before handing me some more detailed data.

Apparently, this job had to do with a team of only two pirates. They were lurking in the nearby Poshiras sector and were so far responsible for damages totaling 3.6 million credits. The fact that they hadn't killed anyone aboard the ships they'd attacked so far was a point in the mission's favor.

"Like I'd let them arrest me when I wasn't even at the scene of the crime," I said. "And it wouldn't have made any sense for them to ask for me to return my payment either."

"Back in the day, cases like that were rampant. We have our previous and present imperial majesties to thank for changing that," Old Man Lohnes said, sounding sincere.

It seemed like Our Chosen Beauty and Empress—aka Her Majesty Amilia Frannodol Orvorus, the thirty-eighth monarch to occupy the throne—was not only popular because of her looks.

Having gotten what information I could from Lohnes, I made various preparations to learn a bit more before heading to the Poshiras sector.

In that sector, most of the planets were unsuitable for human life in one way or another. Some had toxic gasses in their atmosphere, molten lead rainfall, or never-ending storms blowing at sonic speeds that ravaged their surfaces.

It was for that reason that a series of support facilities called "service areas" had been placed in orbit around many of these planets. Some were old colonies or former military bases, while others were just gigantic asteroids that had been retrofitted.

As well as naturally serving as rest stops for upstanding couriers and longdistance cargo haulers, they were also popular hideouts for wannabe mercenaries and criminals.

One such planet, Planet Rifs, had a surface covered mostly in boulders and an atmosphere that was chiefly methane gas. The surface temperature got as low as minus two hundred degrees Celsius, and six-hundred-kilometer-per-hour gale winds raged constantly.

When viewed from outer space, the planet looked bright blue and beautiful, but it was not somewhere mankind would ever land.

The service area orbiting Rifs—named Domilusa—tended to have relatively upstanding patrons. And if one wanted to get their hands on some information in a place such as this, it was safest and most effective to talk to the couriers. Though, of course, it depended on the circumstances. Asking the bartender or other mercenaries for information could lead to my identity being passed on to a target. In the worst-case scenario, they might even come to kill me. Of course, couriers sometimes leaked things as well, but the chances of them doing so

were far lower.

After parking my ship in Domilusa's hangar, I brought a plasti-carton of coffee with me as I headed to a vending machine in the corner of the hangar where I could see some couriers gathered. There were three older fellas, presumably veterans of their profession, all enjoying a smoke.

"Howdy."

"Hey. Hard at work, I see."

I joined their little huddle and tried to give the impression that I was just another courier. I took a sip of coffee and sighed heavily.

Now then, how to go about asking them? I wondered. But before I could say anything, the old fellas started venting their spleens.

"The state of things these days... For crying out loud... Wasn't the army really supposed to be puttin' their backs into runnin' out these pirates?"

"You should be thanking them. All that means we can work safely."

"Thing is... Pirates have actually been showin' up a lot *more* of late... Though these bands are freakin' tiny in scale."

"Aren't those just leftovers from the bands they've already driven out, deciding to finally make a name for themselves?"

"There was one that popped up 'round here... Just that one ship. Tasshia, was it? That toxic salt planet. That's where they saw 'em."

"Tasshia? Of all places..."

"Their hideout is probably somewhere near there."

"I heard someone got attacked by a pretty huge band of pirates somewhere around Tasshia."

"Even with the army stamping so many out?"

"Maybe it's 'cause they've been stamping so many out. Y'know, one might have given 'em the runaround."

"Whatever the reason, it sounds disturbing..."

Planet Tasshia, which had just come up in their conversation, also went by another name—the Toxic Salt Planet. Though Tasshia had oceans, their salt content was an eye-watering fifty-five percent. On top of that, the very atmosphere was made up of hydrogen, oxygen, and sodium chloride. Its landmasses were all bleached pure white from the salt. Lastly, the salt also carried some unknown toxins, so at present, there was no use for it.

One might think that as long as there was oxygen in the atmosphere, people could breathe there. But since there was no nitrogen in Tasshia's atmosphere and the proportion of oxygen was a whopping forty percent, breathing its air would cause your body to rapidly oxidize.

At any rate, by overhearing this conversation, I'd ascertained roughly where the pirates were likely to appear next.

Just as I was wondering how to extricate myself, one of them said, "Oh, look at the time. Hey, kid, you should go take a break too. Rest is important when you're working long-distance."

The old fellas must have finished their break—they all proceeded to extinguish their cigarettes and returned to their own ships.

The conversation I'd just overheard had already provided me with plenty of information. After watching the veteran couriers leave, I began walking back to my own ship. But on my way there, I was stopped by a mugger.

"Hey! Hand over your money!"

He was a skinny boy who looked to be about twelve or thirteen. With an electromagnetic knife in one hand, he stepped forward to threaten me.

In situations like this, common sense dictated that if you could retaliate, there was no problem with doing so. If this was just about money, I wouldn't really mind, but there was no way I was going to let go of my life as well.

"I told you to hand over your money! Do you wanna die?" the boy ranted and raved at me.

I could see that he wasn't used to this kind of thing, so I thought I'd try showing off my admittedly untrained quick-draw skill. I shot the young mugger

in the stomach.

"Urgh!"

Though I'd set my blaster to a fairly low power level, there was still the force of the ignition. It had to have hurt quite a lot.

As I'd expected, the boy was now in too much pain to make any more noise. He was probably going to have burns and blisters where I'd hit him.

"Hello, is this the police? I've just been the victim of a mugging attempt at Domilusa, the service area of Planet Rifs... Yes... Yes, I see. Well then, I've immobilized him, so please feel free to arrest him."

I had my foot down on the boy mugger's electromagnetic knife and was keeping my gun pointed at him as I contacted the police.

Luckily for me, a police ship already happened to be docked at Domilusa, so they'd be coming to arrest him soon.

"Oww..." It sounded like the boy mugger had finally regained the use of his voice.

"Don't move, kid. If you do, I'll shoot again."

Of course, I kept my gun's barrel trained on him.

The boy glared at me with fury in his eyes, but I just thought, *You're the one* who did the wrong thing first, you know?

"Damn it..." he grumbled. "How did I get taken down by a dorky NPC like you?"

"Well, I'm still a mercenary, and I've learned at least a little about self-defense. I'm not that great with a gun, so I keep the power setting low so as to not cause too much of a stir when I miss. That's why you got off easy. If you were dealing with someone truly merciless, you'd already be dead, you know?"

The moment after I said this, he made a leap for his electromagnetic knife under my foot. I lifted my foot, dodged to the right, and once there was some distance between us, I fired three times, give or take, in the general vicinity of his arm.

"Arggh!"

Out of my three shots, one had landed on his right arm—the one he'd reached for the knife with—one on his left shoulder, and one on the floor.

"Didn't I tell you not to move or I'd shoot?"

I picked up the electromagnetic knife again, carefully aimed my gun at the squirming boy mugger once more, and waited for the police to arrive.

If I'd been a protagonist like Arthur, I probably would have proceeded to have a conversation with the boy. I'd convince him to reform, and if he turned out to be an orphan, I'd find someone to take him in. But I never did that kind of thing, nor did I want to.

Before too long, a policeman and a detainment droid finally arrived.

This goes without saying, but a kid like that didn't have any bounty on his head. He wasn't one of the pirates I was after either.

Jeez. Why'd this have to happen right after I got my gun tuned up?

I have the worst luck.

NPC No. 45: "This is the Second Fleet of the Galactic Imperial Army. We are currently conducting a search for members of a large-scale pirate band. You're one of the mercenaries looking for the same people, aren't you? Withdraw at once. That's our prey you're after."

After handing the mugger over to the police, I decided to stay overnight at the service area before heading to Planet Tasshia—the Toxic Salt Planet—the next morning.

As there were no gates nearby, I had no choice but to fly all the way there. I handed control over to my ship's autopilot and, as you'd expect, started reading a light novel. Then, a little while after midday, I suddenly heard a call coming through.

Since I could count the number of people who might go out of their way to talk to me on one hand, I looked to see who exactly it was.

The call was coming from an Imperial Army fleet, of all things.

What the heck do they want? I wondered as I accepted the transmission.

"This is the Patchwork, a civilian ship. I can't help but wonder, what could an Imperial fleet want with me?" I said.

Then a middle-aged male soldier with a stern face appeared on my monitor.

"This is the Second Fleet of the Galactic Imperial Army. We are currently conducting a search for members of a large-scale pirate band. You're one of the mercenaries looking for the same people, aren't you? Withdraw at once. That's our prey you're after," he said to me in a pretty lofty tone of voice. It turned out they were here to wipe out some pirates.

The bulk of his message seemed to be a warning to stay out of their way, but it sounded like his pirates weren't the same ones I was looking for.

Incidentally, the Second Fleet operated one of the central crusader squadrons as part of the Galactic Imperial Army's central fleet—just like the Seventh Fleet, which had saved me once in the past.

The Central Fleet was also famous for the fact that nearly one hundred percent of its commanders and officers came from noble families. That meant they all thought and behaved like nobles.

Even though I hadn't given him my own name yet, this fellow had already decided that I must be a mercenary here to take out some pirates.

Well, he hadn't been wrong about that part, but rather than have it come out later that I was actually a mercenary and face all kinds of complaints, I decided to answer him honestly. However, if I was going to do so, I would have to choose my words carefully. Depending on my choice of words, I could get tripped up and end up being accused of criminal impertinence. I could even face a fine.

"In that case, you need not worry," I said. "The pirates I'm searching for belong to a petty group. I think, perhaps, that they just happened to flee, or they're already at their hideout that's in the same direction as the band you're after."

"Well then, if you have any information, disclose it now. If you don't, we'll consider you to be a pirate collaborator."

Given the risks, I was careful in how I responded to him, but it didn't look like I had anything to worry about in that respect.

"I'm afraid I don't have a great deal of information, but...I did come across a rumor that groups of pirates, both big and small, have appeared near Tasshia, the Toxic Salt Planet. I'm currently on my way there to learn more."

Since there was no need to hide the truth, I was completely open and honest with him.

If he countered that by saying something like "Don't lie to me! I know you have more valuable information than that!" then I wouldn't know what to do next.

"Hmm... It doesn't sound like you're lying. If you do get your hands on any

information concerning a large-scale band of pirates, be sure to report it swiftly to the army," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Luckily, I was facing no such accusations.

If one thought about it with a clear head, there was no way that I'd be trying to take on a band of pirates that was large enough that the military had targeted them solo. Perhaps some circumstances had caused this soldier to get a bit impatient...

In any event, there was no way for me to know what was going on in military circles, so there was no need to worry about it.

I figured that taking off before the Second Fleet would lead to all kinds of trouble, so I let them go first before I resumed my journey to Planet Tasshia.

That was one reason that, by the time I arrived at Luteta, the Planet Tasshia service area, it was already evening.

Although Planet Tasshia was also called the Toxic Salt Planet, when viewed from outer space, it was quite beautiful. Its pure white surface sparkled as it reflected the light of distant stars.

There were many tourists who came just to see this view, so the military and police came to patrol it quite frequently.

Despite this—or rather, *because* people tended to gather there—the area was also often targeted by pirates.

It was kind of ironic that the recent fall of many large pirate bands had resulted in the number of smaller groups increasing.

Though I wasn't sure whether it was at all related, I noticed quite a number of ships docked at the service area. There were all kinds of vessels, including courier ships.

I guess they really might only be here because pirates have got them stranded.

To get to the root of the matter, I headed to a bar inside the service area. There, I found a pretty big crowd of people who looked like couriers.

The interior of this bar looked so old that I thought it might have even been constructed in an era before the founding of the empire. There were tables and chairs made of real timber.

I sat down in an empty seat near the crowd of couriers and ordered a beer. I didn't really like alcohol, but I knew I'd be fine with just one drink.

Upon listening in on the couriers' conversations, what I heard seemed to explain a lot.

"Still, it really was a good idea—forming a convoy of fellow commercial pilots to travel to our next destination, that is!"

"With these numbers, they'll think twice before messing with us!"

"But didn't that idiot Juro run into some pirates just the other day? All his cargo was stolen."

"He said there were only two of them, right? So we'll still have them beat when it comes to numbers!"

"I guess you're right! We'll blast them full of holes!"

It seemed that these drivers had elected to team up and travel in a convoy.

True, doing that would make it a bit harder for pirates to attack them, and even if they only had beams for breaking boulders, a coordinated assault would still reduce most pirates to dust. They might've had some ships among their fleet outfitted with battlecraft for defense, and some of the workers could've been former soldiers or mercenaries. So, considering those risks, it would be wiser for most small bands of pirates not to attack them.

But if they were to end up clashing with a bigger pirate band, the other side was guaranteed to be better armed. Their convoy would wind up looking like a row of sitting ducks.

On another note, while I know they're all drunk, they're still bragging about their plan in a way everyone can hear...

I couldn't make up my mind about whether or not I should report this to the army.

For the time being, I decided to pretend to be a traveler and struck up a

conversation with the guy who seemed to be the leader of the courier convoy.

"Excuse me. Are you planning to go to Planet Nachilema?" I asked.

"That's right, but who are you?"

"I'm just a lone traveler, but I heard that pirates might show up around here, so I was just wondering, would it be all right for me to travel alongside you guys?"

"Yeah, sure. The more numbers we can muster, the more scared the pirates'll be. There are plenty of guys besides you with the same idea. But we take off tomorrow at six in the morning. Don't be late. If you are, we'll take off without you."

"Thank you so much! You've really saved my skin!"

This looks bad.

I thought that for now, I'd travel with them and wait to see how the pirates react, big or small, but this is real bad.

If this had been a convoy exclusively made up of couriers, that might not have been much of a problem, but with an unspecified number of other people, there was at least some chance that a pirate might have infiltrated their ranks.

If we were just dealing with a pirate duo, that wouldn't be so bad. But if a larger band had infiltrated the convoy? They'd have no hope at all of winning.

But even if I told them to abandon their plans, I could tell they weren't going to listen to me.

I guess I'll just excuse myself and contact the Imperial Army.

After paying for my beer and leaving the bar, I returned to my ship and contacted the military.

A pretty android lady appeared on my monitor. "Hello. This is the Galactic Imperial Army's intelligence bureau. Please state your business."

This android greeted callers mechanically and always with a smile. She was really easy to talk to. It was way better than dealing with a living, breathing woman who would be sure to take my call with an obvious look of irritation.

"Actually, I just made contact with the Second Fleet, one of the Central Fleet's crusader squadrons, on my way to Planet Tasshia. They told me to report any information I might find regarding large pirate bands. I'm calling to submit such a report," I told her.

"Thank you for your cooperation. Now then, please tell me what you know in detail."

"Yes, ma'am. I am currently in the service area of Planet Tasshia, where I have learned that a convoy of courier ship pilots will be departing tomorrow morning. There is a possibility that a member of a large pirate band is in their midst. Their destination is Planet Nachilema. Though I don't know for certain that they've been infiltrated, could you please inform the Second Fleet?"

"Understood. We thank you for providing us with this information."

That should've been enough to convince the military to go to a neighboring sector, even if I couldn't expect them to meet up with the convoy.

NPC No. 46: "First of all, let's assume the formation we agreed upon! If we hold the line, we don't need to be afraid of any pirates. And if we all fire together once they come within range, we should be able to drive at least some of them off!"

The following morning came.

When I saw the convoy that had been assembled, I was shocked.

I didn't know where they had found everyone, but there were nearly one hundred and fifty cargo and civilian ships crowding around Planet Tasshia's service area. There were probably some mercenaries among them as well.

I had to admit that any wimpier pirates would likely hesitate before messing with this convoy. But the real pros from larger pirate bands wouldn't be swayed. Those guys were all veterans of battle and plunder, and their equipment would be a cut above that of this crowd. Moreover, if the pirates had a skilled commander, they'd be more formidable than some of the weaker army divisions.

With a well-coordinated team of mercenaries like what we'd had on that security detail job for Neima & Co., they might have stood a chance. But even if a few mercenaries had shown up here, they probably weren't going to be of much use in battle.

You really should have put in a request with the Mercenaries Guild...

But, well, the idea probably only just occurred to them. Maybe they have some other reason they didn't have time to make a formal request, like delivery deadlines.

It wasn't long before the person who suggested the convoy made a statement to everyone.

"I'd like to thank you all for answering our call and gathering here this morning! With this many ships on our side, I don't think any pirates will be too quick to attack us, but they still might, and we can't predict when! Let's all take due caution as we move swiftly toward our destination, Planet Nachilema! Now then, let's take off, starting with the head of the convoy!"

And so the convoy began to move.

The flight time to their destination, Planet Nachilema, was approximately two days.

I positioned myself as high above the rest of the convoy as I was able to and switched on my radar.

For a while—for the first day, in fact—our trip carried on uneventfully.

During the period that Galactic Standard Time designated as nighttime, the crew of the larger ships took turns keeping watch. I had thought something might happen during this time, but nothing did.

The following morning was also uneventful, and the convoy carried on according to plan.

But just after noon on that second day, there was a change.

Two light craft in the convoy suddenly broke away from our formation. And the moment they did, I judged that they had to be pirates. I couldn't tell whether they belonged to the larger band the Second Fleet was chasing or the petty duo I was after, however. In fact, they could've been in cahoots with both.

The people in the convoy were clearly perplexed by their actions, but they didn't react one way or another yet. They were probably just being cautious since they knew that the enemy would also understand one thing very well. If pirates were going to spring an attack on those two light craft, this would be the perfect time to do it. That being said, we still couldn't be absolutely certain that those two ships belonged to the pirates.

But in the next moment, multiple new ships appeared on my ship's radar. And, of course, they were all unidentified.

"A large convoy of ships, incoming! Probably pirates!" I reported.

Regular ships never concealed their registrations like this. So, if all the ships in this new convoy had concealed their registrations, they absolutely had to be pirates.

"Hey! Are you sure?"

"I don't think there's any room for doubt."

An operator on one of the larger ships supplemented my information. "I've just spotted them on my radar too! No doubt about it, these are pirates! Distance, 1.8 billion kilometers!"

After that, the people in our convoy started to panic.

I then heard a young man's voice ring out over my comms line. A video feed immediately followed.

"Everyone, calm down! Let's start by taking a deep breath and contacting the police and military! If we deal with this calmly, we can definitely make it out alive!"

This speech was obviously boilerplate, just meant to keep people from panicking too much, but it actually helped a lot of people to compose themselves.

"First of all, let's assume the formation we agreed upon! If we hold the line, we don't need to be afraid of any pirates. And if we all fire together once they come within range, we should be able to drive at least some of them off!"

Inspired by this man's words, the ships in the convoy neatly arranged themselves in an umbrella formation, with the people in charge at its center.

It appeared that they'd already had a plan in place to respond to threats that I hadn't known about.

"I'd expect no less from a Bishop-ranked mercenary! We can all count on him!"

I guessed that the man who'd suggested the convoy in the first place had hired this mercenary. I'd never seen him before, so he was probably from another branch.

I personally really wanted to run away immediately, but the pirates were

bound to be faster than me. If we put up a little resistance here, we could definitely help buy some time until the military came to the rescue.

Considering this, the young man's suggestion to meet the pirates in combat wouldn't be such a bad course of action.

The man continued. "That being said, I won't be able to do much by myself. If there are any mercenaries in this convoy or other people who can fight, please lend me your support. Come with me to the location where those two ships broke away to engage our enemy."

I saw six ships leave the convoy to support the lead mercenary.

So, including me, the Bishop-ranked merc, and "the two ships who broke away to engage our enemy," as he'd put it, that made ten ships in total. Of this group, the two pilots I most suspected of being pirates were both women. The reason I suspected that was that they both wore similar clothing and had very similar faces. They were most likely sisters.

If the larger pirate band hadn't shown up and I'd tried attacking these two, I'd still be seen as the bad guy even if they did turn out to be pirates, huh?

Society was always on the side of the beautiful ones, after all.

Though the documents I had initially received had mentioned nothing about what the pirates looked like, I decided I might as well send a message to Old Man Lohnes to check if he had gotten any additional information.

While I was doing that, a sudden transmission came through from the Bishoprank merc on a private channel. It was limited to the ten ships in our party.

"This is just between us. The pirates probably have a contact inside the convoy. We can't let them eavesdrop while we talk strategy."

I'm sure the mercs here all understand the situation, but what about those probable pirate sisters?

Though I think that since they're pirates too, there's a good chance of them going to the other side and asking to split the spoils of the raid...

"I'd like to introduce myself, but there's no time. I have a strategy in mind, so just follow my lead. If the ships in the convoy barrage them with their lasers,

the pirates' main force should split in two. That'll be our chance to take the fight to them. At the same time, two of us can go around behind them and catch them in a pincer formation. I think that's the standard approach here."

His plan really was by the book and much the same thing I would have thought of. It would be an effective approach.

But, well, I bet it's more or less what the pirates will be expecting...

And there was another problem.

"So, I'm looking for some people to go around behind the enemy convoy..." he said.

Who's going to volunteer for that?

The idea was that someone would get behind the enemy while our convoy's barrage had them in a panic. There was still a danger of being spotted, though, which would surely mean getting shot down.

"You in the light brown ship, I want you to handle that. I'm guessing you're a Knight rank, right?"

I hadn't even identified myself as a mercenary, but he simply assumed I was one and was forcing a role on me.

The look on the Bishop-ranked merc's face reminded me of that asshole extrovert—Arodich Ireblugas—back when I had been a student.

"Sure. Roger that," I said.

Someone had to fill that role, and I had no reason to refuse. Besides, he was absolutely right about me being Knight rank.

"O-Oh...? Well, I'm counting on you, then. We just need one more... Batt, can I count on you?"

"Leave it to me! I'll take them down, no sweat!" someone else—presumably Batt—replied.

The Bishop-ranked merc seemed like he hadn't liked how casually I'd replied to his request. He'd probably been hoping I would complain, at which point he could berate me. He could've said something like "How dare you be so selfish

when the lives of everyone here are on the line!"

Judging by the fact that he was calling the others by their names despite never having introduced himself, I guessed that the other six mercs were likely his buddies.

"Right then. You two, head out as soon as our convoy begins their barrage. As for the remaining members of our party, when those pirate scum split up and head in opposite directions, we'll also split up to engage them!"

And that was how our operation to buy time until the cavalry arrived—in the form of the Imperial Army and the police—would commence.

### NPC No. 47: "Listen up, you sitting ducks! All fear us, even—" "Now! All ships, commence the barrage!"

Our strategy meeting had left me with some doubts, but once it was over, the pirates finally started to close in on us.

A massive number of Jolly Roger insignias both big and small looked like they were glaring at us as the ships approached.

The Bishop-ranked man worked to motivate everyone in the convoy as he issued his orders. "Okay! Everyone, stay calm! Once we've reeled them in, start firing on my signal!"

After a few minutes of silence that followed, a transmission came through from the pirates on the open channel.

"Listen up, you sitting ducks! All fear us, even—"

"Now! All ships, commence the barrage!"

While the man who looked like the pirates' boss was still talking, the Bishop-ranked merc gave the signal, and the ships in our convoy all started firing.

Though they were only armed with lasers for breaking up large rocks, with nearly 150 ships unleashing their beams at once, it still looked like light was raining down upon the pirates.

Perhaps the pirate ships' guards were down—this assault resulted in direct hits on many of the ships at the head of their fleet, taking them down.

While the pirates were still reeling from the shock of this turn of events, the mercenary called Batt and I successfully maneuvered behind them. However, we were only to attack them once they had split up into two or three groups. There was no point in striking any sooner.

"Damn you! You've got some nerve!" a pirate yelled. "Go around and attack their flanks!"

Just as anticipated, the pirates split their forces in two.

Be that as it may, the pirates were still transmitting over the open channel as they discussed their strategy. We heard every word. Is everything all right over there?

At any rate, if they were going to be kind enough to split up for us, then there was only one thing left for us to do.

"Booyah! Okay, pal, I'll take the right where the flagship is! You deal with the left!"

"Roger."

Then, almost simultaneously, we each fired a proton torpedo at the rearmost ships of our respective halves of the formation. Our targets exploded in spectacular fashion.

"Now! Go for it!"

The moment they had been given the signal, the other eight battlecraft from our convoy all began a coordinated assault on the pirates. The rest of the convoy broke into two groups and fired their rock-splitting beams again, commencing another volley of their own.

If we keep the pressure on, could we actually win? I wondered, but things were not so easy.

Though the pirate fleet had been split in two and the rearmost ships of each half had been blown to smithereens, they soon collected themselves again. The heavier ships put up their barriers and started to edge closer to our convoy as they shielded the rest of the pirate fleet.

Of course, we had a plan to deal with this too. The convoy was to fall back while continuing to fire their rock-splitting beams.

However, that would only serve to buy some time.

The Bishop-ranked merc continued to issue orders to everyone in the convoy and tried to keep morale up. The convoy was managing to hang in there, but it was only a matter of time until they were overwhelmed.

On top of that, the spies from the pirates' side who were lurking in our

convoy might take this opportunity to finally take action.

Just as I thought that our numbers would soon start to dwindle, I noticed a heat source approaching the pirate fleet from above.

I panicked and pulled away from the pirates. Then, the enemy ships that had been exposed to that heat source were all blown to smithereens.

This was, without a doubt, a barrage from an army fleet.

Without a moment's delay, there came another transmission.

"Pirates, we have an announcement for you! This is the Second Fleet of the Galactic Imperial Army! If you resist, a second barrage from us will turn you all to space dust! Resist or surrender—make your choice!"

A young man, presumably the commander of the fleet, advised the pirates to put down their arms.

It appeared that they had taken my report—and the convoy's dispatch—seriously.

I still thought it was pretty nasty to unleash such an attack from all their cannons without warning us first. If I'd reacted any slower, I'd have been a goner. That attitude separated them from the Seventh Fleet—those guys definitely would have been civil enough to warn us first.

The police soon arrived as well, and the pirates were arrested without exception.

As for the Second Fleet, they immediately left the scene and handed all of the cleanup work to the police.

Once the police had finished detaining the pirates, taking them away, and cleaning up the wreckage from their ships, some of them came to lead and guard the convoy.

As to why the police felt the need to escort us, they were concerned that some remnants of the pirate fleet might emerge to attack the convoy again.

You know, I can't help but think that's the army's job...

After traveling for another half a day, we reached Planet Nachilema.

In the lobby of the spaceport, the director of the convoy thanked all ten of us who had engaged in direct combat with the pirates.

"I really can't thank you all enough! I didn't think we'd be able to hold our own against pirates for that long!" The director seemed to be pretty excited by the fact that his own convoy had managed to repel the pirates, even for a brief period of time.

"As we were hired to provide security, all we really expect is our payment," the Bishop-ranked merc said.

"And of course, you shall get it!" said the director, shaking the merc's hand with a big smile on his face.

Then, he approached me and the presumed pirate sisters.

"And I'd like you three to have this. I had a lot of expenses, so this is all I have on me. I know it's not much, but please accept it," the director said.

The envelope he handed me after saying this contained two hundred thousand credits in cash.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"Well, it may be chump change, but it's better than nothing."

"Sheela, that's so rude."

The presumed pirate sisters confidently accepted their own envelopes and confirmed their contents.

Now then, how can we determine whether or not they're actually pirates?

"Right then. While I'd like to say it's time to disband..." the Bishop-ranked merc began, and at that moment, his buddies restrained the presumed pirate sisters.

"Wait a minute, what are you doing?!"

"No!" the other girl cried. "Please, let go!"

"Shut up, you pirate scum! Since we were in an emergency situation until a moment ago, I decided to leave you alone for a while, but now that I know

you're pirates, I'll show no mercy!"

"Where's your evidence?!"

"Ouch! Ouch!"

The presumed pirate sisters glared at the Bishop-ranked merc, but he simply stared sternly back at them. The Bishop-ranked merc's buddies proceeded to confiscate the presumed pirate sisters' envelopes.

Well, that's kind of mean.

To me, it looked like they had waited until the two sisters had been paid to accuse them. That way, they could pocket more money for themselves.

After I'd received additional information from Old Man Lohnes, I had been able to confirm the women's identities based on their appearance, but I couldn't help but wonder how these guys had determined that they were pirates.

There was still one thing I simply had to do. "Ah... Could I speak to you for a moment?"

"What?!"

The moment I spoke to the Bishop-ranked merc, he whirled around to fix me with an irritated glare.

"What reason do you have for asserting that they're pirates?" I asked.

"An acquaintance of our client's was one of their victims. They identified these two."

At the same time the Bishop-ranked merc said that, a young man stepped forward and glared at the presumed pirate sisters.

"Thanks to you two, my cargo was stolen, and I ended up in a lot of trouble!" he cried out, launching into a tirade against them.

The older sister turned away in a huff while the younger one just glared ill-temperedly at the man.

As far as I could tell, there was no doubt that this man was a victim of the two sisters.

"I see. So did the victim submit a request to the Mercenaries Guild?"

"No, he said he didn't have that kind of money."

"So, that means the request I accepted was submitted by someone else," I said.

Now that I knew this much, the rest was simple.

I guessed that even if I had told the Bishop-ranked merc and his buddies that I had seen the pirate sisters first, they wouldn't have listened to me. I decided it would be less hassle to just let them have the collar.

Just as I was thinking that, a preemptive complaint was thrown my way.

The Bishop-ranked merc sneered at me scornfully. "So? What are you getting at? Are you saying you want to steal the credit from us?"

Well, I expected that much.

"I wouldn't do anything of the sort," I said. "First of all, I took on this request and investigated all over the place to try and capture these two. I already had my eye on them when the larger pirate band attacked us. But since I wasn't certain they were who I was looking for, I didn't arrest them. You confirmed they were pirates and arrested them before I could. In cases like these, we say they were 'captured due to external factors,' and though the request I accepted is now null and void, there'll be no penalty. The posted reward will be paid to their captors. I was just checking to make sure that process goes smoothly. As a Bishop-ranked mercenary, I'm sure you're familiar with those procedures?"

If they had snatched the sisters right from under my nose, that would be a different story. They hadn't known I was pursuing them, though, and if they had managed to identify and capture them after I had left this port, I wouldn't have been able to say anything about it.

"You said you accepted a request? Are you actually a merc?" asked the Bishop-ranked merc. It seemed like he was starting to panic.

"Yes. I'm registered with a different branch from the rest of you. Incidentally, you're familiar with the procedure for cases of capture due to external factors, aren't you?"

"Ah! Right, right! Yep! It'd be great if you could take care of that!" He obviously didn't know the procedure.

At any rate, I was going to have to contact the Mercenaries Guild and the police.

"Okay. Well, I've finished with my end of the procedure. Please report the arrests to your branch of the guild, and collect your payment. The police shouldn't be too... Ah, they're already here."

To my surprise, the police had come very quickly. These officers had probably been on one of the ships escorting the convoy.

After arriving so abruptly on the scene, the officers wasted no time in arresting the pirate sisters. The women continued to cry and plead, but there would be no escape for them.

At that moment, the Bishop-ranked merc's buddies glared at the police as if to say, Why don't you mind your own business?

This was just my guess, but the group of them were probably planning on having their own "fun" with the pirate sisters. Perhaps they'd planned on handing them over to the police after that. Or maybe they'd planned to sell them off instead. This would obviously be a crime, but in some circumstances, it could also be seen as harboring a criminal or aiding and abetting one's escape...

But...something tells me these guys understand none of that. In fact, is this guy even a Bishop rank?

More important than that, I'm a bit suspicious as to whether he's even really a mercenary.

But, well, I won't pursue the matter further.

Of course, the sisters weren't aware of any of this.

"You'd better just accept it, Kloa," one pirate said to her sister. "This is far better than being captured by that dorky guy over there."

"I suppose so... I know *you'd* be at least a bit happier to get captured by a handsome guy, Sheela."

"Kloa...? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Eek! I'm sorry, Sheela!"

The two gorgeous pirate sisters were over the moon by having at least avoided being captured by me.

"Right. I'll be going, then," I said before leaving the port behind.

Nothing to do but to run away now before things get ugly.

#### Aside: The Bishop-Ranked Mercenary (?) and Company

Inside a heavy cargo ship were seven lively people, each with a glass of liquor in one hand.

"I gotta say, that went pretty well!"

"Talk about stupid pirates!"

"If only that dorky bastard hadn't got in the way, we'd have had some extra fun..."

"But, you know, I can't believe that dork was really a mercenary after all..."

As the group was having this uninhibited conversation, one of the monitors in the room suddenly switched to another image.

"Excellent work."

The moment the group saw this, the ship's crew rose to their feet and saluted.

"The plan you suggested—to use civilians as bait, hand information over to the pirates, make them battle with the civilians, and then sweep up the spoils when the dust settled—went off without a hitch. Return to base and await your next orders."

After stating that, the young man on the monitor was about to end the transmission, but...

"C'mon, give us a little time off," one of the men on the ship demanded. "You know we missed out on our 'bonus.'"

The young man on the monitor looked peeved. "Don't do anything stupid. You should simply follow your orders from above without question." He then immediately ended the transmission and disappeared.

In the next moment, someone threw a glass at the monitor.

"Damn it! He sure thinks highly of himself. He's only a commander thanks to his parents."

"I know, right? Why don't we go and kill that dorky bastard to let off some steam?!"

The men openly bared their anger and suggested an outlet to relieve their stress, but the Bishop-ranked mercenary checked their aggression.

"Calm down," he said. "Don't do anything that might draw attention to us. Besides, why not let him act big? For *now*, that is."

After those words from the Bishop-ranked mercenary, the rest of the crew regained their composure. Their smiles slowly grew sinister.

#### NPC No. 48: "I hate the sound of this..."

After someone else had butted in on my mission to capture the beautiful pirate sisters and dashed my hopes of a reward, I hotfooted it back to Planet Ittsu. I wanted to avoid getting in a fight with the people who'd meddled in my affairs.

It seemed like the Bishop-ranked merc and his buddies resented me (I guess?) for spoiling their *fun* with the beautiful pirate sisters... I braced myself for some kind of counterattack, but it never came.

I thanked my lucky stars for that as I landed my ship in the guild hangar before heading to reception, but I couldn't help but worry that those guys might be lurking somewhere.

"Sup."

"Hey. I hear you failed your mission."

When I called out to Old Man Lohnes, he greeted me with a grin and a chuckle.

"It wasn't a failure—it was rendered null and void," I countered. "Some guy who hadn't even accepted the request just happened to catch them first. I said as much when I contacted the guild, didn't I?"

"I was joking. Though, why didn't you just say they were your targets?"

"That was before I confirmed their identity. Those guys seemed like trouble."

"That's so like you," said Lohnes. This time, his smile was so wide that I could see his teeth.

By the way, I had mentioned the gratuity the convoy's leader gave me in my report, so I had no reason to feel guilty about that.

While I was looking for a suitable job, someone suddenly appeared next to me.

"Ah, Mr. Ouzos. You've come at the perfect time!"

"Urk..."

The figure who had just popped up was Alphonse Zaystall, the male receptionist I could only see as a cross-dresser or a transcendently beautiful girl.

"What's the matter? I don't have something stuck to my face, do I?" Alphonse asked.

"Not as far as I can see."

I'm begging you, please don't talk to me.

It isn't as if he's done anything to me.

As I'd already said, since this person looked like a transcendently beautiful girl (or cross-dresser) for all the world, I risked provoking jealousy or murderous intent in the mercenaries around me just by talking to him about work.

Perhaps Old Man Lohnes realized this, because he spoke to Zaystall in my place.

"By the way, do you have some business with this guy?" Lohnes asked.

"Yes, I do. This isn't only for Mr. Ouzos's eyes, but requests for this mission have just begun circulating."

Zaystall then showed Lohnes a sheet of holo-paper.

"Let's see... A request for reinforcements to planetside counter-terrorist forces on Planet Teura in Count Icolai's territory? Why, this is a mission of the utmost importance!"

"It's a planetside combat mission. The ruler of the planet, Count Icolai, is a supporter of the current empress, and the citizens of his territory seem to be living in peace. Despite this, an anti-imperial resistance force who call themselves 'The Righteous' have emerged, and they've taken over some land, including an energy plant and the industrial sector," Zaystall explained.

From those details, it sure sounded like a job for a mercenary—a proper combat mission. But even so, it didn't sound cut-and-dried enough for me to take it at face value.

"Are you sure that count hasn't done anything bad behind the scenes? And

what about his son, for instance?" I asked.

Noblemen who only pretended to be good and whose virtues were skin-deep were a dime a dozen.

"There aren't any negative rumors about either of them. The count is apparently a bit eccentric, but that's all."

Is it just me, or are these so-called eccentric men always the most trouble?

"Anyway, isn't it usually the military's job to deal with that kind of thing? You're talking about the cornerstone for the empire's energy supply," I said.

"They said they submitted a request to the military, but they responded that the anti-imperial factions might prevent them from deploying. They can't be expected to deal with it swiftly."

"I hate the sound of this..."

Why is this mission being treated as something so important?

The reason was that it was the cornerstone of the empire's energy supply. This had come up in our conversation earlier, but it's worth pointing out again.

During the era of the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma, Planet Teura had been considered to be a worthless planet. That kingdom had ruled the planet until it became part of imperial space, so it hadn't been developed.

When Planet Teura had been invaded by the empire, the ruler at that time made no attempts to defend it. He had just abandoned it as if to say that he didn't care if his citizens were killed.

One hundred years ago, the planet had been bestowed on the House of Count Icolai, whose head had only been a baron at that time, by the emperor of four generations prior. That emperor had been the grandfather of His Grace the Duke. When that had happened, the planet had been developed for the first time in its history. It'd only been then that the lives of its residents began to improve. Forty years ago, the first proper planetary survey had finally been conducted there as well.

As a result of that five-year-long survey, a vein of Tridam ore—an energy source—had been discovered. This was a famous enough story that it appeared

in history textbooks in imperial schools.

To process Tridam ore, one would melt it first and then refine it to remove any impurities. As a result of this, it produced some very pretty orange crystals. Melting those crystals once more produced a form of fuel that was necessary for maintaining the many functions of the empire's cities as well as propulsion for many forms of transport.

The survey of Planet Teura concluded that there was enough Tridam ore there to provide energy for the entire Galactic Empire for approximately ten thousand years. Having this fuel source targeted by terrorists was a serious matter.

I supposed that, once all the details of the assignment had been scrutinized, you could expect a breaking news announcement any moment now.

"There aren't any requests to join the terrorists' forces, but I guess that goes without saying. How about it? Will you join?" Old Man Lohnes asked as he handed me the holo-paper.

It wasn't as if I had *no* combat experience inside planetary atmospheres, but I wouldn't say I had an abundance of it either. I didn't feel very confident about taking the job.

Besides, when I considered the fact that a factional struggle between nobles could be part of this conflict, I really got a bad feeling about it.

At the same time, the fact that it wouldn't involve combat between mercenaries made it a little easier to swallow.

It was also worth considering that the outcome of this conflict could affect all of our lives from now on—I couldn't refuse.

However, my way of doing things prohibited me from accepting a mission without getting more background information first.

"For now, let me think about it just a little longer," I said. "There's still time left before the application deadline, right?" I then walked away from the counter.

After exiting the guild in order to learn more, I headed to Pattson's Pharmacy

to talk with Gonzales.

The Black Market Shopping District's atmosphere was no different today, but it didn't look like the butcher was advertising any new products.

When I arrived at Pattson's Pharmacy, there was a slip of paper on the door. It read "Closed Temporarily."

He obviously wasn't working the front of the store today, but when I rang the intercom at his house just behind the pharmacy, he didn't answer that either. I called him on my Wrist-Com instead.

"Hey. How odd, you don't usually call me," Gonzales answered, sounding a little tired.

"I'm out in front of your store right now, but it says you're closed temporarily. Why's that?"

*Is his body broken or something?* 

"I'm at a gathering of the Pharmacists Association. The moderator role rotates, and it finally came around to being my turn. There's nothing to do here except to listen to old fogies drone on, so I'd like to skip... I've heard rumors that they take your license away if you don't show up."

It turned out there was nothing to worry about, but Gonzales had the most peeved expression on his face as he complained so profusely. It practically sounded like he wanted me to come and rescue him. He usually acted so cool and collected, but he was surprisingly unable to cope with adversity.

At any rate, it sounds like there's no way for me to rescue him.

It would've been one thing if we were dealing with a combat situation, but there was nothing I could do about obligations like work functions. After all, I was completely unrelated to his profession.

"That sounds rough..."

"Not only that, some old coot touched my butt, saying, 'Maybe we'll get you to moderate these exclusively from now on...'" Gonzales whined.

"That really sounds rough..."

If the old coot in question had known who Gonzales was on the inside, that'd be one thing. But in terms of appearance, he was still quite the bespectacled babe.



Gonzales had only gotten his license to work as a pharmacist after his accident, and that had occurred while he was a university student.

Normally, a full-body prosthesis was made to look exactly the same as the person's body did in life. And even if their appearance was different, people typically didn't change their gender.

In other words, as far as those old coots were all concerned, Gonzales must've been born a woman and was now a beautiful bespectacled pharmacist.

If he were to say that he was actually a man on the inside, he might get out of moderating the pharmacists' gatherings from now on...but the bastards might strip him of his license, huh?

"Well, that's what's up. So if you want information, you'll have to go ask the old fortune teller."

"Got it. Well, hang in there."

"Ah, woe is me..." muttered Gonzales, sounding dismayed to the very end before he ended the call.

Next time I see him, maybe I should treat him to some merch or something...

## NPC No. 49: "Just see that you do your best not to get killed out there."

After leaving Pattson's Pharmacy, I headed straight to the Fortune Teller's Building that was located in a corner of the downtown area.

The building's interior was as mazelike as ever, and I made my way through it. Eventually, I entered a store with a sign that simply read "Crystal Ball Fortune-Telling."

Inside was a space with dark-green shag carpeting on the floor to muffle footsteps and a table with a deep purple cloth over it.

At the far side of the table sat an old woman in a robe with a gray hood and a slightly hooked nose. She couldn't have looked more like a witch. There was a grin on her face too.

"Oh, welcome. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

The old crone then gave me what she probably thought was a businesslike smile, but it inspired nothing but terror in me.

Somehow, I managed to push that feeling deep down and returned her greeting.

"You seem lively as always."

"I may be old, but I take care of my appearance," she replied. "That being said, when you get to my age, your bones do start to rattle. I'm thinking of getting a full-body prosthetic so I can be young again."

"Full-body prosthetics are supposed to be for people who've been in some kind of life-threatening accident or have a severe illness. If you don't fit one of those criteria, surely they won't give you one?"

"There's always a way. I know *all kinds* of people, you see," said the old crone with a grin.

I'd tried to halt her ambitions—which honestly reminded me of Rossweisse's. But all I'd done was learn that I had no chance in hell of doing that.

I decided to carry on with my original purpose for being there. "For now, I'll do with some information..." I said and set an envelope down on the table.

"This concerns the terror crisis on Planet Teura, in Count Icolai's territory, yes? Just a minute..."

I didn't even say what I wanted to know about. She sure is perceptive.

Though it could just be that I'm easy to read.

After slipping the envelope into her pocket, the old crone held her hands up to her crystal ball (monitor, really) and started muttering an incantation (which was absolutely an activation phrase). She then looked into the ball for a while.

"Hmm... There aren't any particularly bad rumors about Count Icolai or his son. Although the son is apparently a bit of a blowhard, and the count himself has a scary face."

"I did hear he was somewhat eccentric. Is that true?" I asked. I was concerned about what Zaystall had told me.

"You might say that despite being a pure-blooded noble, the count doesn't really seem that way."

"Could you be more specific?"

"If you want to know, take the job," she said, deftly evading my questions.

"All right. Now, what about the terrorists?"

"Their chief assertion is that it's wrong for the empire to monopolize such an important energy source and gobble up all the profits themselves."

"With the reigns of our previous and current imperial majesties, I don't really think that's true anymore..." I said.

To go even further, the Tridam ore had only been discovered on Planet Teura during the peaceful reign of the previous emperor. In reality, he hadn't monopolized it or taken all the profit for himself.

I didn't know what I might discover if I looked behind the curtain, however.

"I expect that these terrorists are actually loyalists from the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma," said the old crone.

The Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma was a state that bordered the empire. Nekirelma had declared war on the empire one hundred long years ago, and when it'd looked like they were going to lose, the kingdom had offered up part of its territory and allowed the empire to colonize those places.

In a matter-of-fact tone of voice, the old crone then recounted the history of Planet Teura.

"Under the rule of the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma, Planet Teura was never developed, nor was it ever sent financial aid—they were left to fend for themselves. On top of that, people from other planets discriminated against Planet Teura's citizens, calling them hicks and primitives. Moreover, when it was invaded by the empire, not only did the kingdom abandon it, making no attempt to defend the planet, but they readily offered it up as a gift to the empire as part of their armistice treaty. They thought they were pawning something worthless off on the empire. Despite the eagerness with which they abandoned it, when the planet was developed and the kingdom realized it could generate vast sums of money for them, they started saying, 'That planet is the rightful property of the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma, so we'll be taking it back.'"

Her expression suggested that she harbored some anger about this situation, but I decided not to ask why.

"So that means... If the terrorists asked the people of Planet Teura to help them..." I suggested.

"They never would," she said. "Given a choice between the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma—a rule that offered no development opportunities, discriminated against the people, and even offered them up as a sacrifice in war—and Count Icolai—a nobleman from the empire who put effort into developing the planet and improving their lives to the point where they've been able to become wealthy—it's obvious which one they'd choose. Besides, unlike the empire of today—where nobles and elite subjects have gradually improved their attitudes thanks to the tireless efforts of our past and present imperial majesties—the

nobles of the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma are just as stupid as those of the empire of yesteryear. If they got power, not only would the people of Teura have all their assets stolen from them, but they would be treated more or less like slaves. So, with all that in mind, the current empire looks a lot better."

Though the situation seemed pretty rough, it didn't look like the locals were likely to be hostile toward me.

"And, well, I guess it would be bad news to lose part of our energy supply..."

Stupid as I was, I still understood that it would be very bad if Planet Teura were to fall into the hands of the Nekirelma terrorists.

"Just see that you do your best not to get killed out there," said the old crone with another big grin.

That's really creepy, I wish she'd knock it off.

At any rate, I decided to go home and rest for the remainder of the day.

On the evening news, there was a report about the terror threat to Count Icolai's territory. With the media making this much fuss, I doubted that the faction opposed to the current empress would even be able to take any overt steps to block the military, but I couldn't know for sure.

On TV that night, some so-called intellectuals passionately shared their predictions about the effect this act of terror might have on the energy supply as well as the true identities of the terrorists themselves.

The next day arrived.

Once I'd accepted the mission, I headed straight to Planet Teura, which was located in Count Icolai's territory.

There were already quite a few ships at the spaceport, so I had to wait a while for permission to descend to the surface. It also looked like it'd take some time for them to even process my data and give me a ticket for admission.

I decided to read the light novel I'd brought with me to pass the time. This was a brand-new volume of the series So I Got Reincarnated As a Motorhome, So What? Got a Problem With That?

Just when I'd got out a plasti-carton of coffee and was all ready to get to reading, I suddenly got a call. And the caller was someone I really would have hoped to avoid hearing from ever again.

"Yes. hello...?"

"Long time no see, Captain Ouzos!" said a singsong voice.

"Can I help you with something, Rossweisse?"

"Since we're going to be fighting on the same battlefield, I just thought I'd greet you."

Judging from her tone of voice and her expression as she appeared on my monitor, she surely had something to be happy about. I cursed myself for somehow managing to guess what that reason was.

That being said, if we had Rossweisse on our side, victory was more or less assured, though I still had to stay frosty.

"You seem awfully chipper today. Did something good happen?" I asked.

"Yes! The android that will serve as my second vessel is finally finished!"

I had thought that was probably it, but in all honesty, this was the worst possible news she could've told me.

Rossweisse then delightedly explained everything her new vessel could do. "Though I called it an android, it's actually a hybrid body—a mix of mechanical and living parts. So, in terms of looks, it's indistinguishable from a living human being! In fact, it's so high-spec, I'll be able to eat with it—and do *stuff with the other end*. Now I won't have to be bored when my ship is docked! I still haven't picked the body up yet, though."

"What can I say... Congratulations."

"Thank you very much! As soon as this mission is over, I'll be free to go get it!"

If she'd been a human, that line would have, without question, been a death flag.

Though I couldn't help but wonder, since she was born a battlecraft, why did she feel the need to eat or *do other stuff*? It was a mystery.

I guess that's just how advanced the ancient civilization's AI systems were.

Come to think of it, if Rossweisse's body is finished, what will become of Mr. Cocky, aka Lambert Reargraz?

"Out of curiosity, once you've picked your body up, what are you going to do with Lambert Reargraz?"

As long as I'd known Rossweisse, she had been desperate to put a skilled pilot in her cockpit. Surely she'd have no more use for Reargraz after this. I couldn't help but wonder about that, so I asked her.

She immediately looked the other way. "F-For the time being, I plan to keep him on board. He's gotten so famous, and he can be surprisingly thoughtful as well." She sounded embarrassed as she stated her plans for him.

There you go. The sudden emergence of a tsundere ancient weapon, huh?

It was just a matter of course that I had the worst encounters.

# NPC No. 50: "Well, let's leave the flashy air battles to the flashy mercs. We just need to do our own boring jobs, providing air support to the ground troops."

While I was still dealing with the terror I felt because of Rossweisse's body being completed, my turn to receive permission to land came around.

My ship, the Patchwork, was an old model. While I'd made many modifications to it, it was fundamentally a Multitype, which meant it could be flown both in space and planetside. It also had swappable armaments.

I had requested to join this mission as air support for the ground troops. As for why, I knew that within Count Icolai's territory, there would be a lot of extra munitions available to me. I was scheduled to have two mini air-to-surface missile pods known as Throwing Nuts fitted to my ship.

While each round didn't pack that much firepower on its own, their small size meant that each pod could hold a whopping nine rounds. The name "Throwing Nuts" apparently came from the fact that the rounds were smaller than other air-to-surface missiles. Since they were still missiles, it wasn't like they couldn't be used in outer space at all, but it'd be really hard to land a hit. They were, of course, mass-produced munitions employed as an auxiliary weapon by patrol planes and bombers flying inside planetary atmospheres.

In other words, since they were being used by security craft that patrolled Tridam ore mines and energy planets, the empire had stockpiled an abundant supply of rounds.

Apart from joining the ground troops or air support, I did have the option to join the troops tasked with taking out the enemy air squadron, but with Rossweisse on our side, we probably didn't need anyone else.

Although, even if we didn't have Rossweisse with us, I wouldn't have joined

the anti-air force anyway. I didn't want to stand out.

"Patchwork, please begin your descent. Be sure to land at your designated coordinates."

"Roger that."

In the distant past, it had been a real pain to enter a planet's atmosphere. But nowadays, all ships, no matter how small, were made of materials that could withstand the aerodynamic heating (adiabatic compression) sustained on reentry, so there was nothing to worry about. Anyone could descend to the planet's surface easily enough.

That being said, one couldn't entirely throw caution to the wind when entering the atmosphere. Even if I no longer needed to worry about the thermal barrier, there was still the unresolved issue of steering during descent. If something went wrong in the process, there wouldn't be much I could do about it.

After safely navigating through the planet's upper atmosphere, I saw the vast brown landscape stretch out below me—a wasteland of sand and rocks.

After landing at the designated coordinates, I saw a large number of vessels crowding the area. There were tanks, armored cars, and both fighter planes for atmospheric combat and hybrid Multitype battlecraft.

The moment I set my ship down at the touchdown location, several mechanics came over to me.

"Do you want to change any of your requested armaments?" asked a man who seemed to be the leader of their crew. His subordinates had already begun topping up my fuel and ammo and were conducting an inspection of my ship.

"Nah, I'll just take two sets of miniature air-to-surface missiles—those Throwing Nuts. Thanks."

"Got it. We'll hold on to the proton torpedoes you currently have slung under there."

"Thanks, buddy," I replied.

The mechanics here seemed to be a cut above the rest, and I'd definitely made the right choice in submitting my request beforehand. Two sets of Throwing Nuts were immediately brought to my ship, and they finished swapping them with the torpedoes in the blink of an eye.

When that was finished, I went to the tent where the mercenaries were all lined up as I had to go through a final identity check.

Around this tent were a number of other ones that could be rented as accommodations. There were also tents with basic shower facilities and a mess hall where food was being served. Besides those, there were quite a few street stalls packed into the area, so it almost seemed like a market.

While I was staring vacantly at this scene, someone gave me a heavy slap on the back.

"Hey! Fancy seeing you here!"

"Oof!"

Wincing from the pain, I turned around to find that the one who'd whacked me was Molieze Rotrua—a mercenary who'd worked with me on the security detail for Neima & Co.

"L-Long time no see..."

Though she was on the boorish side and had disagreeable habits like slacking off and making fun of others, she was gorgeous and very tall. She was muscular, but as she still had a very well-proportioned figure, she was quite popular.

I know this is rude of me, but I'd rather not get any closer to her.

Of course, none of this was of any concern to her.

She seemed to be enjoying herself as she patted me on the shoulder. "I saw Arthur and Seira over there. I gotta say, compared to those petty disputes between nobles, where we mercenaries might be divided along enemy lines, I much prefer having a clear enemy to crush without us mercenaries being divided. It's simpler!"

"Well... I guess so... And it's encouraging to hear that Arthur and Seira will be joining us too," I said, once again wincing from the pain.

Another voice barged in on my conversation with Molieze. "And not only them, but we've got Léopard and the Winged Helmet—the Ebony Devil and the Crimson Goddess are here too. I'm starting to feel sorry for the terrorists."

The newcomer was mercenary and former policeman Bernard Zug. He, like Molieze, had also been a member of the security detail for Neima & Co. In his hands were a grilled skewer and a beer that he seemed to have bought from one of the street stalls.

We're scheduled to go into battle tomorrow morning. Are you sure you should be drinking this afternoon?

Wait, he's probably just thinking it's fine to drink because it's the afternoon.

"What, really? Then we're sure to win!" responded Molieze, clearly pleased by Bernard's news.

"Even so, you'd better not let your guard down."

"I know that!"

While Bernard was cautioning Molieze, his words didn't carry a lot of weight since he had a beer and skewer in his hands. But if what he said was true, I really was glad I hadn't joined the anti-air troops.

When I had made my descent, I had noticed some media ships around. Interviewers and their crews had to be lurking around the celebrities already.

"Well, let's leave the flashy air battles to the flashy mercs. We just need to do our own boring jobs, providing air support to the ground troops," Bernard said before chomping down on his skewer.

Hey now. Whether our job is boring or flashy, it's still important.

Though...I'm sure he understands that full well and is just making light of the situation. That's all right.

After wrapping up my conversation with those two, I headed to the mess tent to get some bread and chunky soup. After that, I walked past the street stalls and bought a skewer and some fruit before heading back to my ship. But on my way back, I spotted Mr. Hero, aka Yuri Puliliera.

Fortunately, he didn't notice me, so I slipped by without saying a word,

successfully getting away from him.

When I returned to my ship, I found it in a very sorry state.

My ship wasn't broken or anything; the problem was that a bunch of extroverted mercenaries were having a barbecue right next to my ship.

In and of itself, I didn't mind them having a party. People were having similar gatherings all over the place.

The problem was that they'd left their belongings right in front of my ship's entry hatch, blocking it off.

I certainly would have been within my rights to ask them to move their things, but I didn't expect them to quietly comply with my wishes.

However, if I couldn't get back into my ship, I wouldn't be able to sleep.

Under these circumstances, I had no choice but to kill time until they finished their barbecue.

So, I went back to the tent where I'd checked in. I had them show me a map of the area that was anticipated to be used as the battlefield and some other details. I also listened to some of the locals talk about the buildings and facilities in the area and how they expected the weather to change. And although they had only bits and pieces of information about the terrorists, I was able to learn something about them as well. I also found out some details about the energy plant we were supposed to retake. In the end, I'd decided to kill time while gathering some information that might come in handy the next day.

Then, I borrowed a laptop in the tent to download a map of the surrounding area into my Wrist-Com. But in the middle of the transfer, I suddenly became aware of a commotion going on around me.

When I looked in the direction the noise was coming from, I spotted Fialka (aka Léopard). With a big smile on her face, she was deftly handling her onlookers.

When you're that beautiful, you can't help but pick up all kinds of admirers. Sounds tough.

Just as I was thinking that, Fialka's android maid, Shelley, suddenly greeted me.

"Hello, Mr. Ouzos. We haven't seen you since the other day."

"Ah... Hi there..."

"I see you're being as diligent as always, gathering information before the mission," she said.

"Not really. When I tried to go back to my ship, I found some people nearby had blocked the entrance with their belongings, so I came back here to kill time."

I made no attempt to put on a facade and simply told her the simple facts of my situation.

"This is only conjecture on my part...but weren't you planning on doing the same exact thing when you returned to your ship, just by using your Versitool?"

As Shelley pointed that out, her gestures were almost like those of a fleshand-blood human.

Though I of course knew that today's Als were no less intelligent than humans, recently activated ones always seemed somehow artificial. But after they had been operating for a long time, their artificial intelligence was able to learn from their experiences, and that impression of mere artifice slowly faded away.

I guessed that the same was true for Shelley, but even so, there was something strangely *humanlike* in her mannerisms.

"Yes... Well... I'm free now, at any rate."

"It's good of you to conduct your own investigations. My mistress always leaves such matters to me. That's why she brought me here today," she explained before moving in such a way that looked like she was sighing.

Apart from the smooth metallic surface on top of her head that was shaped to look like hair and lens plates in place of eyes, Shelley looked exactly like a person. Her mouth moved, and her expression changed as well.

But she did not breathe, however. So it had only looked like she had sighed.

I guess that just goes to show how long she's been working for Fialka.

"Ahh, enough already! They're just so persistent!" said Fialka, walking over with a fed up expression.

"Thank you for your dedication, milady."

"Oh, give it a rest—it's not like I've just been let out of prison. Though it does almost feel like I've escaped from hell."

Though she'd handled her admirers with a smile, it still must have been a nuisance.

Then, Fialka noticed my presence. "Oh? Why, fancy seeing you here."

"Ah... Hi there..."

She had greeted me in a softer tone of voice than I was used to. In the past, she might have said something more like "What's this coward doing here?!"

It's gotta be that time I rescued her that caused this change. Well, as long as she's acting nicer, I should be glad.

But...the fact that she spoke to me is getting me a lot of nasty looks from the other mercs.

"Unlike you, milady, Mr. Ouzos had been gathering information all by himself. You might learn from his example."

"Even so, it's not like you have to be out here to gather information."

"But 'out here' you might be able to pick up some details from locals that aren't available on the Net, yes? Who knows. Why not try investigating for yourself, milady?" Shelley said.

"Okay..."



Fialka sounded reluctant as she responded, but she did end up speaking to a nearby soldier who seemed to know a lot about the area.

As I watched Fialka and Shelley interact, they seemed more like sisters than a mistress and her servant.

And as Shelley watched Fialka talking to the soldier, she had a smile on her face.

Five hours had elapsed since I had started my fact-finding mission.

After being interrupted by Fialka's appearance in the middle of it, I returned to searching on the laptop in the mercenary tent and spoke to more of the locals. Though this investigation was like looking for a needle in a haystack, I struggled through it. I then returned to my ship to find the extroverts had disassembled their pile of belongings that had blocked me. It looked like I would be able to climb inside.

However, they were still sleeping nearby after getting themselves drunk. If I wanted to get inside, this was my only chance.

I surreptitiously pushed aside what remained of their belongings and managed to climb aboard.

After letting out a sigh of relief, I was sure to lock the hatch behind me. I then went to take a shower and change before I collapsed into my makeshift bed.

Once again, I felt so thankful that I'd opted for a battlecraft with enough space for a shower, bed, toilet, microwave, and refrigerator, however tiny each of those may have been. I set my alarm clock for the morning, curled up in bed with my light novel, and waited to start feeling sleepy.

## NPC No. 51: "Air support squadron, can you hear me?! I'm Tony Icolai! Count Jack Icolai's son!"

It was six o'clock the next morning, and the alarm I'd set the previous night was ringing.

After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I changed and tamed my bedhead before stepping out of my ship.

I emerged to find the remnants of the barbecue gathering from last night still sitting outside. In other words, they had left their trash here—leftover charcoal, empty cans, paper plates, plastic knives, and forks. There was no way I was cleaning all that up myself, so I ignored it and headed to the mess tent to get breakfast.

After having managed to avoid running into any acquaintances at breakfast, I returned to my ship to find the extroverted mercs having an argument with the count's private troops right by it.

After giving them a sideways glance, I started inspecting my ship for the mission ahead. But as I was checking my fuel and ammo levels, my radar function, and the performance of each thruster nozzle, a woman in the extrovert camp said something to me that made zero sense.

"Hey, you NPC dork! You need to clean that up! You're the one who dropped all that trash, right?"

"She's right. It's not like we would have left it there, so there's no reason we should have to clean it up," piped up one of the men who was with her. He was spouting the same twaddle she had.

You obviously made this mess yourselves, so why is it my responsibility? But, well, the truth is that they probably honestly believe that they have no obligation to clean up after themselves.

I'd been harassed by people just like them when I was a student, so I knew their type.

But they appeared to have forgotten that the count's private troops were right there next to them.

"Stop being so selfish and clean up your own damn garbage!" cried the leader of the group of the count's soldiers. "You're the only ones here who left a pile of trash lying around till morning! Everyone around here has confirmed that you were the ones making a ridiculous racket last night, and I noticed it too! Don't blame your shortcomings on other people!" He berated them until everyone in earshot was glaring at the partygoers.

It sounded like while I had been busy talking to people last night, they had been making life miserable for everyone around them.

Even they weren't shameless enough to keep up their act under the watchful eyes of everyone nearby. And, though he was a private soldier, the representative of the count's forces far outranked them, so they obediently began cleaning up their trash.

Still, I couldn't predict what they might do in retribution. Even after I had finished inspecting my ship, I pretended that I was still working on it until they were done cleaning. Perhaps it was partly because the count's troops were still watching them closely, but they all went quietly back to their own ships once they were done.

The woman who had first spouted that nonsense about the garbage being mine returned to a flashy ship that was docked right next to mine.

Having finished checking my ship without any issues, I strapped on a survival backpack that was fitted with a parachute. I'd be able to use it in the event that I was shot down. Then, after I sat in the cockpit, an all-hands transmission was broadcast to every member of the air support squadron for the ground troops.

"Air support squadron, can you hear me?! I'm Tony Icolai! Count Jack Icolai's son!"

I suddenly couldn't help but gasp.

When Count Icolai's son—who had introduced himself as Tony Icolai—appeared on my screen, I recognized him as the son of a nobleman whom I'd seen in the gun shop some days ago.

I never would have thought he was Count Icolai's son.

Although Count Icolai *himself* didn't have a bad reputation, it might not've been correct to extend the father's reputation to his son... There was no shortage of noble families like that.

I braced myself for whatever unreasonable demands might come out of his mouth next.

"I'll be your commander today, so I'll be giving you your orders! At least, that's what I'd like to say! But I don't really feel like meddling in your affairs, so just follow the ground troops' requests and sort yourselves out! Anyway, I still need to note the state of battle on my map and brief my dad every now and then, so don't forget to report to me about anything you spot, any time you engage in combat, and anything you shoot down, okay?! There's no way I'm letting these terrorists rob my family of its golden goose, not when it makes enough money for me to screw around for all eternity! That'll be *my* energy plant one day, so you better not destroy it under any circumstances, got it?! We've got plenty of supplies ready for you, and cash too! So get out there and make sure you take out those damn terrorists who dared to rob me of my future fortune and kill my future citizens! Beat the hell out of 'em!"

His speech laid bare a kind of half-baked arrogance and his love for his homeland...I guess?

"Okay, you'll be hearing from my dad in a minute. Everybody, look up at the screen in the sky."

As Tony said that, a three-dimensional hologram was projected in the air. The image displayed there was that of a handsome older man, about fifty years of age.

This guy had to be the lord of Planet Teura—Count Jack Icolai.

He was certainly a good-looking older man, but he hardly seemed like a nobleman. Instead, his somewhat wild demeanor brought the boss of a pirate or mercenary band to mind.

I guess Tony looks kind of like him. Maybe it's the eyes?

As all eyes turned to focus on the count—with those nearby able to look at

him directly—he launched into his address.

"Mercenaries, garrison troops, private troops, and the citizens' militia! I thank you all for gathering here today! I'm Jack Icolai, the one in charge of this planet —Teura. I inherited the title of count from my own dad. Terrorists have dared to leave their grubby bootprints all over this planet of mine. With all the hard work of my granddad, my dad, and then me, we finally uncovered a vein of Tridam ore on this planet, and now these terrorists have the gall to ask me to hand it over. Not only that, but they've taken over part of my energy plant! I have an idea of where these jerks came from, but nothing changes the fact that they're thieves! At first, I prioritized evacuating my citizens, and that let the terrorists get the upper hand over me. But! Now that the citizens have all been evacuated, there's no need to hold back anymore! Give them a spanking they'll never forget, and make them regret underestimating me so sorely that they'd rather be dead! Thankfully, in order to prevent them from fleeing, the Fifth and Seventh Fleets of the imperial army are currently setting up a blockade in orbit. With them surrounding the planet, not even a single piece of space trash will be able to get away! Now then, take off and go beat the hell outta those terrorists! Don't you dare delay!"

After rattling off an address that was just as wild as his appearance, the count personally climbed into an armored vehicle that had pulled up beside him.

Eh? Don't tell me he's going to the front line himself?

Well, from the look of him, he does seem like the kind of guy who'd do that...

Following suit, the ground troops and the air squadron both started to file out.

Flying away now when congestion was at its peak would put me at risk of a collision. Once the ships that'd been around me were at a safe distance, I slowly took off.

The air squadron—otherwise known as the Retake Air Superiority Squadron—had its own briefing, but the ground troop support squadron had to match pace with the ground troops. It was going to take some time for us to reach the energy plant.

On my way, I remembered something that'd been in the count's address.

I was shocked to hear that the Fifth and Seventh Fleets were surrounding Planet Teura. Not only were they adamant that the terrorists not be allowed to get away, but they probably didn't want them bringing in reinforcements either. The Seventh Fleet had saved my skin in the past, but this would be my first time sharing space with the Fifth.

Well, it's not like I'm going to meet any of them face-to-face.

Even so, I'd heard that the Fifth Fleet was not to be messed with.

According to a search engine I used—Doctor Lookup Locus—the commander of the Fifth Fleet was Rear Admiral Lunaris Bradwell. She was a rare female commander with the noble rank of Countess. Though she was beautiful and capable, she was also known as a cruel and ruthless rationalist. She showed no mercy to her enemies, her subordinates, or her superiors. I'd heard that she had even once shouted at Lord General Kielect Erundibar—the leader of the Imperial Guard.

All those who flew under her banner, be they nobles or commoners, were calm and disciplined, and they would never be seen doing anything inefficient. According to rumors, if they caught anyone using their rank or standing as a shield from criticism—like in order to get away with bullying and harassing others—that person would be dubbed as a pest, breeding inefficiency. Then, they'd use those pests for target practice and fill them with holes. At least, I'd heard people say that.

As a commoner, I was glad to hear that they didn't condone bullying or discrimination, but at the same time, their training was known to be unbelievably harsh. Not many people wanted to join them.

In any case, with two fearsome fleets backing us up, there was no chance of enemy reinforcements swooping in from outer space or of anyone escaping. I just needed to stay calm and focus on executing our army's strategy.

# NPC No. 52: "I think I'll give it a go. Though it's gonna be a long shot."

After we'd been flying for a while at a leisurely pace and matching the progress of the ground troops, the terrain containing the energy plant gradually came into view.

"This is the air squadron. We've sighted the enemy's air forces. We're about to commence hostilities."

The main air squadron—which had preceded us by some distance—had just made contact with their enemy counterparts.

"Sounds like they're underway. All right. This is the main company, calling the air support squadron. Send a few fighters to cover each of the ground companies."

"This is HQ. Don't forget to report back when you've done that!"

As soon as the main air squadron's battle kicked off, an order came in from the count for those of us in the ground troop support squadron. That was followed by a reminder from the count for us to report back to him.

By the way, terms like "main company" and "HQ" can get a little confusing. Here's an explanation of the chain of command.

Main company: The ground forces, where the count was, which also served as a command center for the entire army.

HQ: Where the count's son was, which was back where we'd been stationed when we first came to the planet. Also our headquarters, to spell it out completely. Was also the communications center for the ground support squadron.

**Ground forces:** The infantry division tasked with recapturing the facility itself. The linchpin of the entire

operation.

Main squadron: The air forces tasked with eliminating the enemy's air presence. Included Fialka, Rossweisse, and Arthur.

Air support squadron: Tasked with lending support to the ground forces' recapture effort. The force I belonged to.

Incidentally, not many mercenaries had wanted to join the air support squadron. Even including the count's own private pilots, there were only thirty-five of us.

The reason for that was a report we'd received in advance of the mission. It'd said, "The enemy plans to throw everything they've got at the air support squadron before whaling on the ground forces."

As a matter of fact, I was detecting a lot of enemy fighters on my radar.

As for our ground forces—the linchpin of the whole operation—there were nine infantry companies, including the main company.

This meant we were able to assign four planes to each company except for one, since we didn't quite have the numbers. Because of that, Bernard, Molieze, and I had ended up defending the eighth company, codenamed H (Hotel) Company. It'd be just the three of us.

Deferring to seniority, we left it to the middle-aged Bernard to be our leader, and I just stared at my radar readout as we advanced.

I'd had the opportunity to hear all kinds of details from the locals when, thanks to those extroverts, I was unable to return to my ship, and it had turned out to be pretty helpful. I'd learned where bandits used to hide out long ago. And I'd also found out about a number of caves with drinkable groundwater. Since I'd marked down every location where the terrorists could be hiding, I fired beams near them and waited to see what happened. I was able to flush many of them out that way.

Fortunately, the enemy hadn't deployed any of their own air support ships along the route Hotel Company was taking. There was the occasional tank

company along the way, but those were easily taken care of. Molieze would blow them away with bombs, or they'd be turned to Swiss cheese after being strafed by Bernard's beam cannons.

Incidentally, the main air squadron apparently carried off their own battles in style. According to reports, some bombers had approached them from the other side—some pretty huge ships, actually, and no one was sure how they'd procured them. There had been five of them, at that.

But the King-ranked Ebony Devil, supported by Arthur, had shot them down with ease.

Arthur's ship had silver edging on top of a white base coat. The contrast of white and black between the two ships must have looked pretty attractive.

Besides those two, the air squadron also had such notable mercs as Fialka (aka Léopard), Rossweisse, Lebin the edgelord, and the Crimson Goddess. Just like the feats I'd once seen Nosweil perform, they had apparently all left trails of light across the sky with enemy ships exploding in their wake.

Thanks to them, there were hardly any enemy air forces left to attack our ground troops.

Praise be, praise be to the main air squadron.

#### Aside: Fialka Tielsad

"All right! That makes twenty-four that I've shot down! I'm glad they were all just drones—they can't manage tricky maneuvers!"

"Milady, there are three more at four o'clock. All drones. Their altitude is 4500."

"Roger!"

Acting in accordance with Shelley's intel, I turned my ship's nose to point at four o'clock and then increased my altitude.

The main air squadron was also meant to be the squadron focusing on eliminating the enemy's air presence, so we were accompanied by craft with AWACS—Airborne Warning and Control System. However, my mother ship, the

Uklimo, was equipped with a radar of the same level of precision. So even though she was only monitoring my surroundings, it was quicker and more precise for me to just ask Shelley what was happening.

For this purpose, I had the Uklimo standing by ten thousand meters above the army's headquarters. I had obtained authorization to leave it there, so it wouldn't be attacked by the Fifth or Seventh Fleet.

After I changed my heading, the three drones immediately approached me.

It'd be one thing if these were manned ships, but I don't need to be worried about some drones!

I gripped the joystick of my trusty ship—call sign "Leopard"—which was a model Si-09 built by my family's company, Tielsad Corp. After adjusting my ship's position, I took out all three drones as they flew past.

"All right!" I shouted, briefly pumping my fist in the air.

"At the present juncture, there seems to be no sign of any enemy craft. Nor is he in the vicinity," Shelley said.

"I see. In that case, I'll head back to resupply."

As for who *he* was, she meant the Blue Hornet—that bastard was currently fighting on Count Icolai's side.

He seemed to be a mercenary, so it wasn't at all strange for him to be taking part in this operation. But I could never forgive him for trying to shoot down my escape pod! Ever since I had first spotted *him* among the mercenaries, I'd had Shelley maintain surveillance on him.

If he tries any funny business this time, I'll shoot him down!

After I returned to the resupply base at our headquarters, some mechanics from Count Icolai's territory swiftly replenished my ship's fuel and ammo. They also expertly performed a simple check of my craft.

In the meantime, I downed a 500ml sports drink and went to the washroom.

You might wonder why I did that in the middle of combat, but it's more important than you'd think. Though I was wearing "support shorts" in case of an emergency, whenever possible, I much preferred not to use them.

#### **Support Shorts**

Those designed for men resemble regular boxer shorts, and those for women look like bike shorts. Support shorts are used by battlecraft pilots as an incontinence measure during prolonged flights for when the urge to urinate simply becomes unbearable or in the event that the pilot is rendered unconscious. Not only that, but they're also used for work in outer space, by people who are disabled by illness or injury, by patients immediately after surgery, and by elderly people with mobility issues. In short, they are used in all situations in which it may be difficult to deal with one's bodily excretions normally.

My Si-09 battlecraft, the Egalim, was a model manufactured by the Tielsad Corporation. That company was managed by my father and had undertaken the manufacture of spaceships in general. My ship had been modified for my personal use and bore the call sign "Leopard."

Its exterior had a base coat of cream-white paint along with black trim. The wings and the tailfin were emblazoned with my logo—the profile of a leopard's head.

However, for some reason, one side of the hull bore an anime-style painting of a girl with a leopard's ears and tail.

Since it even kind of looked like me, I really hated having it there. But Shelley had dismissed my complaints with just one line: "Don't you think it's cute?" And so it remained there.

Anyway, once my ship had been resupplied and inspected, I took off to rejoin the battle. And that was when a report came from our side's AWACS that was difficult to believe.

"Cyclone Eye to all units. Five signatures detected in the northwest. Identified as heavy bombers. I repeat. Five signatures detected in the northwest. Identified as heavy bombers. Judging from their flight path, they intend to

bomb HQ. After that, we speculate that they will head to the civilian zone just behind HQ."

Are they really deploying heavy bombers for an atmospheric battle? It looks like the enemy has prepared more carefully than we thought.

I turned my ship's nose in the direction of the enemy bombers.

Then several other transmissions came in.

"This is Diabolos. I've confirmed the bombers' position on my radar. It looks like they're well protected."

"This is Windsword. I have also confirmed the bombers on my radar. They're on one of the enemy formation's flanks."

The first transmission had come from the Ebony Devil—aka Albert Sirclud—the strongest and most exalted mercenary even among those at King rank. The second had been from Arthur Lingard—a rookie, I believe. Both were reporting that they were in the vicinity of the enemy bombers.

"This is Cyclone Eye. Diabolos, Windsword, I'd like the two of you to eliminate the enemy bombers. We'll send backup to take out the forces guarding them at once. There's a high probability that the civilian zone is their principal target. We're counting on you."

"Got it."

"Roger that!"

After those brief responses, the pilots of the white and black ships cut their comms lines.

"Cyclone Eye to all units. I want anyone currently available to go and eliminate the forces guarding the bombers."

A number of ships immediately responded.

"This is Leopard. Already on my way to the field, so I'll change course and engage the guard unit," I said, being sure to make my own report.



Anyway, Hotel Company and our team of pilots were steadily getting closer to

the energy plant.

But, in the middle of our journey, I spied a large pillbox looming on the horizon. A local had told me that it'd been used during an exclusively planetside war when the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma had been founded. It also went by the name Fort Neimus.

It was a circular structure, about thirty meters high and eighty meters in diameter. Not only would it take more than a ten-tonne bomb to even scratch it, but its surface had a reflective coating, meaning that beam weapons would simply bounce off it.

Partly due to the fact that it was a former military facility, it was currently designated as being off-limits.

And, of course, the terrorists had elected to reinstate it as a pillbox to shoot at us from.

"Incoming fire from Fort Neimus! Say, is that an old-style beam Gatling gun like what was originally installed there? The bastards restored that rusty old thing?!"

"Some say that you can still see the ghosts of soldiers there... Maybe they can take care of the terrorists for us?"

As the ground troops started broadcasting their complaints over the airwaves, they were interrupted.

"This is Hotel Leader! We're under intense fire from Fort Neimus! We need support!"

That request for air support had come through from the leader of our ground company.

"Roger that. While we cover you, take care of the report to the main company."

"Got it! Now hurry up and do something! We can't advance like this!"

Once our conversation with the ground troops was over, Bernard spoke to me over our team channel.

"I said 'roger,' but what are we gonna do?" he asked.

"How about I drop one of my bombs on it?" suggested Molieze.

"Your ordnance won't do a thing to it. Don't even bother."

Incidentally, the bombs that Molieze was carrying were the type that you just dropped and left to gravity. They had a five-hundred-kilogram payload and probably wouldn't have any effect.

That being the case, how are we going to shut that pillbox up?

Though it probably wasn't *impossible* to do something with our current equipment, it was going to be an all-or-nothing attempt.

That being said, it was better than not trying.

"Okay then. Can you two draw the fire from that Gatling gun poking through the embrasure?" I asked.

"What are you planning on doing?"

"I think I'll give it a go, though it's gonna be a long shot."

After hearing my plan, Bernard and Molieze started flying left and right in front of Fort Neimus at considerable speeds. While the enemy attacked them, of course, they both dodged the cannon fire beautifully.

Then, while the enemy's attention was focused on them, I adjusted my aim, getting ready to fire my Throwing Nuts right through the embrasure at the front of the pillbox. A split second before my two wingmates flew past the structure, I fired two rounds.

I'd timed it perfectly. My Throwing Nuts tumbled into the pillbox just after my wingmates had passed in front of it, and the roar of an explosion followed.

From the outside, the pillbox didn't appear to have been scratched, but the people who'd been operating the beam Gatling gun probably hadn't gotten off so lightly.

As expected, the cannon fire from Fort Neimus stopped.

Right now, I'd better ask the ground troops to go take control of the fort.

"We don't know when they'll get it up and running again, so please assume control of the fort while you have the chance."

"Roger! We'll go around the back of the pillbox and take it over!"

Hotel Company swiftly approached the structure.

Taking control of the fort is their job.

Whoops, I'd better report this to the main company.

"Main company. This is the air support team attached to Hotel Company. At present, Fort Neimus is silent. Hotel Company is in the process of taking control of the interior," I told them.

"Roger. Good work silencing their cannon crew. Should we send over a nearby company in case they have trouble conquering the fort?"

"Please ask Hotel Company about that directly. That's not something I can judge from out here."

"Got it. Keep up the good work."

That's all I need to report. Now, we just need to wait for them to conquer the fort.

Incidentally, the main company had multiple comms operators responding to our reports.

Well, I guess it would be impossible for the count to ask that son of his to be a frontline operator.

Just when I was thinking that things had calmed down a bit, Molieze shouted over our comms channel.

"You sure can handle yourself, huh?!" she yelled. "If we only look at your combat performance in your ship, you're on the level of Queen rank!"

"Uh, thanks..."

I was happy to be acknowledged, but Molieze's attitude was more than I could take.

"You've got some skills, huh? I'll have to buy you a drink to commemorate your score today," Bernard chimed in. I could see him grinning on my monitor.

It was with a heavy heart that I realized surviving this battle meant I'd be going to the victory party afterward.

# NPC No. 53: "What are you all, stupid?"

After we conquered Fort Neimus, the operation to recapture the plant proceeded smoothly.

Another reason for that was that the enemy seemed to have put most of their personnel into their main air squadron, which didn't leave many enemies on the ground. Perhaps they had staked everything on Fort Neimus.

However, when we arrived at the energy plant, our effort to recapture it couldn't proceed any further.

That was because the enemy had barricaded themselves inside.

We couldn't afford to destroy the facility—even a beam fired at low power would probably damage it. A direct hit from a missile would spell major trouble.

In that case, we had no choice but to leave everything up to the ground troops. The most that those of us in the air support squadron could do was inform them of the enemy's movements and guard against any attacks from the enemy's air forces.

Our allied air squadron had gone up against the enemy's air forces and had already eliminated most of them. Twenty percent of our main squadron's pilots were currently tracking down and pursuing any remnants of the enemy air force. The other eighty percent were patrolling our perimeter.

Thanks (I suppose?) to this turn of events, I had some time to spare and managed to see something unnerving—the Blue Hornet.

After noticing that he wasn't acting hostile toward Arthur, the Ebony Devil, or Fialka in particular, I realized that he must've been on our side.

But, man, a run-in with that guy would be no joke!

Fortunately, he didn't seem to have noticed me, so the best thing for me to do was to ignore him. Besides, the terrorists were still hanging in there.

If what the old crone with the crystal ball had said was true, it wouldn't be

odd if the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma's military were involved here. In fact, the terrorists could be soldiers from that very army.

If so, then I guess they really can't surrender.

Supposing our enemies were purely terrorists, they would rigidly adhere to their warped system of beliefs, so they weren't likely to surrender in that case either.

They were probably waiting on reinforcements from their home planet. But according to a report from the Fifth and Seventh Fleets who were blockading this planet, they'd just sunk a fleet that looked like it had probably been sent here by the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma. There was no chance of reinforcements making it to them.

If we were willing to sit tight and wait for some time to pass, we would be guaranteed to be able to recapture the energy plant eventually, but there was no telling how long that might take.

The ones doing the waiting were a mix of military units (meaning private soldiers and garrison troops) and us mercenaries.

As for the units from the civilian militia, if given a suitable explanation—considering their lack of expertise—they'd willingly take orders from soldiers or mercenaries too.

All that remained was to keep a close eye on the terrorists to ensure they didn't escape as we waited for the ground troops to swing into action.

However, there was one group of people who simply couldn't wait.

I suddenly heard the count shouting via an all-hands transmission. "Hey! What are you idiots doing?! You *know* the air squadron was ordered to watch the perimeter!"

I could only guess that everyone was looking around to see what was happening.

In the next moment, several beams were fired simultaneously at the plant, but luckily, none of them actually hit it.

"If we could deliver the killing blow to those terrorists, wouldn't that be a huge addition to our war results? It'd be a waste to not even try!"

"This is war, right? Who cares if we blast one measly plant to smithereens?!"

"Let's get this over with! I want to take a shower and drink some sparkling wine!"

We could hear the voices of the people who just couldn't wait. They were those extroverts who'd joined the main air squadron and had just attacked the plant. They probably didn't have the presence of mind to follow military regulations, much less understand the state of battle.

Without stopping for one second to listen as the count shouted at them, their formation of six craft all looped around to come in for a second strike on the energy plant.

Then, I heard another voice yelling.

"The ground troops have just broken into the plant! Do you want to blow them up as well?!"

This time, the shouts were coming from Tony, the count's son. He seemed genuinely incensed, and his expression was actually extremely threatening.

But the team of extroverts didn't seem at all bothered by the two men shouting at them. Their responses were all frivolous.

"This is what you call a noble sacrifice in war!"

"They'll be heroes, so what's the problem?"

"Really, it's their fault for taking so long in the first place!"

It appeared that these people were blind to everything besides their own circumstances and desires.

Even so, they were unbelievably stupid.

Refusing to stop when the commander of the entire army had told them to meant that they were already outside the bounds of sanity.

I wonder... No, there's no two ways about it. Those extroverts have got to be the sons and daughters of nobles. Not only that, but judging from their attitudes, some of them must come from families of higher status than a count too.

The old fortune teller said that at least our nobles were better than the ones the Kingdom of Planet Nekirelma has, but what do you know, we sure still have some idiots of our own.

This was a battlefield, though.

After listening to that exchange, without even really needing to discuss it, those of us in the air support squadron got into formation to shoot those extroverts down. If they were going to defy orders here and kill their allies for the sake of their own selfish desires, they could hardly complain if we shot them down first.

Partly due to the fact that they were allies, their first attack had taken us by surprise, but there wouldn't be a second.

However, in the very next instant, a sudden streak of light cut through the sky. All of the extroverts' ships sustained explosions, but they were not so damaged that they couldn't still manage to crash-land.

"Eek!"

"Damn it! Was that the enemy? What are those guys doing on our perimeter?"

"Wait? Was that an allied craft? Why are you attacking us?!"

In a textbook case of the pot calling the kettle black, they hurled their complaints at the one who'd attacked them. However, the culprit snapped right back at them.

"What are you all, stupid?" she yelled.

The one who had executed the attack was Malireicht Luihyen Falina, also known by her alias, Crimson Goddess.

She was a statuesque beauty with hair as red as pigeon blood rubies, golden eyes, fair skin, and a figure so spectacular that she'd make supermodels throw in the towel. On top of all that, she had a lustrous voice that matched the rest of her appearance perfectly.

"We've all been doing everything we can to take back this energy plant, and you're gleefully trying to destroy it?" she asked. "And you nearly blew up all the ground troops along with it. What were you thinking? But for now, be quiet and perform an emergency landing."

I thought that what Miss Falina had said was exceedingly fair, but the extroverts didn't seem to understand.

"What have you done?! You're just a mercenary! I'm Marquess Rousoubul's daughter! I'll tell my father to have you punished!"

That voice belonged to the woman who'd landed her ship next to mine at base camp—an extrovert who'd given off noble vibes from the very start. In an irritated tone of voice, she was trying to assert dominance over Falina based on her family's social standing.

The other extroverts were also slinging insults at the Crimson Goddess, but their audio was distorted, so I couldn't really make the words out.

At that point, the count shouted at them again, making no attempt to conceal his anger.

"Hey, Rousoubul's little girl and you other brats I've been taking care of!" he yelled. "What you idiot garrison troops have done is a grave violation of the military code! You better prepare yourselves for heavy penalties!"

It turned out that these extroverts apparently weren't mercenaries at all, but garrison troops. Their ships and outfits were so flashy that I'd just assumed they were mercs.

"Are you kidding?! I'll have you know that I'm the daughter of a marquess! Why am I being criticized?!"

The count continued to yell back. "You idiots don't seem to realize that what you just did amounts to an attempt to destroy the backbone of our empire's energy supply. It'd be one thing if it had been unavoidable or an accident, but you tried to blow it up of your own volition. This could be grounds for execution, regardless of status. At any rate, hurry up and land your ships! If you don't, you'll be shot down as suspected spies since you attacked the plant intentionally!"

The extroverted noblewoman seemed pretty scared by the count's intensity. She and her comrades proceeded to carry out emergency landings a fair distance away from the plant.

Another hour passed.

The terrorists, deciding it would be pointless to hold out any longer, finally raised the white flag. They also revealed that they'd had to tie up one of their comrades. The group explained that the terrorist they'd tied up had set up a remote-detonated bomb in the facility and had intended to blow the plant up along with all his comrades once he'd escaped.

For that reason, they'd restrained that guy—who was actually their leader—and then came out to surrender.

Thus, our mission to neutralize the terrorist threat seemed to have come to an end.

# NPC No. 54: "Well, you're a veteran of life, so you can buy all of us drinks! Hey, everybody, let's go to one of the food stalls! Open bar!"

Once the terrorists had all been detained along with that team of extroverted nobles, a victory party was held that evening at base camp.

Four people in particular—the Ebony Devil, Crimson Goddess, Winged Helmet, and Léopard—were surrounded by a huge media crowd.

Only the Blue Hornet was nowhere to be seen.

Incidentally, Lambert Reargraz (meaning Mr. Cocky) was terribly nervous about all the attention he was getting, but the other three all seemed used to it.

Arthur was also being swarmed by the media. Seira was taking this opportunity to cling to him and make a name for herself as his girlfriend.

In the meantime, I took care of resupplying my ship with fuel and ammo. I also tried to reclaim my proton torpedoes from storage...but I wasn't able to.

Those extroverts had apparently carried off the proton torpedoes I'd put in storage. Since there was a chance some dust had gotten inside them when they crash-landed in that wasteland, the mechanics told me they'd have to check the torpedoes out before returning them to me. While they didn't really think any dust could have gotten in there, they'd said they just wanted to make sure.

Proton torpedoes were ultimately a consumable item, and I certainly could have just bought new ones. But since they were fairly expensive, I elected to wait until they returned them.

As for the mechanics, I could only bow my head in gratitude when I realized that they were still carrying out inspections for the sake of everyone's safety. They surely must've really wanted to attend the victory party like everyone else.

Payments for this mission were already scheduled to be sent to our branches of the Mercenaries Guild in the coming days. So, if I was being honest, I had

planned on going home before the party even started. If I were to attend the victory party and end up getting in a fight with some weirdo—or especially the Blue Hornet, whose face I'd never seen—it would be no laughing matter.

In the end, I landed my ship near the mechanics' garage. Then, after getting my name checked off in the combat participation log at HQ, I bought a few skewers from the food stalls on my way back to my ship. The garage was far away from the center of HQ, so the noise from the party sounded greatly subdued.

After making a meal of my skewers, coffee, and some sliced bread, I made sure to lock up my ship tight and then curled up on my makeshift bed with a light novel to read.

## Aside: Arthur Lingard

Once I was finally free of the media, my exhaustion caught up with me all at once. To put it bluntly, I found it harder to handle the media than it was to shoot down my enemies.

"Are you okay, Arthur?"

"I might be on my last legs..."

"Then let's return to our tent, shall we?"

"Good idea."

Seira was worried about me too, so we tried to return to our tent early that night. But then, Bernard, Molieze, and Lebin showed up.

Bernard had a cup in his hand that seemed to contain alcohol. "Hey there, kid. From the look on your face, I'm guessing the media swarmed you."

"It was more tiring than combat..."

"You're still dragging that girl around? How about taking me out once in a while?" Molieze said before suddenly putting me in a headlock.

Her chest was pressed against my face, so when she whispered in my ear, I couldn't help but feel a little funny.

"Th-That hurts. Please let me go."

"Molieze! Please don't get so close to my Arthur."

"Ooh, scary. Just kidding!"

When Seira yelled at Molieze, she immediately let go of me.

Thinking to myself that I wouldn't let myself get caught again, I approached Lebin, who was standing nearby.

"Hey," I said. "I heard you put up some nice results."

He fistbumped me as a greeting—something he had taught me. "You could say that. Though there are five mercs I could never measure up to—the ones in the black, red, and blue ships, as well as the Winged Helmet and Léopard."

"Those five, huh... The Chartreuse Winged Helmet, in particular, is worlds apart from us," I commented.

"The red one was also incredible. The way she took care of those idiots—disabling their offensive capability while still leaving them enough mobility for a forced landing? That couldn't have been easy to pull off."

"I bet Ouzos could have managed it, though."

With his superb skills, if Ouzos tried it, he might pull it off, I thought.

"That guy *does* have some serious chops. He managed to fire a missile through the embrasure of a pillbox from two kilometers away, after all," Molieze said, giving us a report of Ouzos's exploits.

I found this a little hard to believe, but since she had no reason to lie about it, it was probably the truth.

"If he's that exceptional, then why does he remain at Knight rank?" I asked. "Though I do get that he thinks it would be more trouble than it's worth." This question had been on my mind for some time, and I'd directed it to Molieze.

"Same reason as me. When you get to Bishop rank, you have a lot more responsibilities and it's way more of a hassle. Knight rank is just better. It's more easygoing."

Her answer was the same as I'd previously heard from Seira. But this also led

me to discover that Molieze, too, was remaining at Knight rank on purpose.

"So, where is the man in question?" Lebin asked.

Bernard's answer was surprisingly self-serving. "I'm guessing he went home. And I was gonna get him to buy me a drink."

"Wouldn't you usually be the one to buy him a drink?"

"Hey, I'm a rookie compared to you," Bernard said. "Buying rookies drinks is a veteran's responsibility."

Then, Molieze decided to try and take advantage of Bernard's assertion.

"Well, you're a veteran of life, so you can buy all of us drinks! Hey, everybody, let's go to one of the food stalls! Open bar!" she yelled.

"W-Wait a minute. I heard that you're famous for being a heavy drinker! Cut it out! You're gonna use up my whole paycheck!"

As Molieze headed to one of the food stalls, Bernard tried to drag her back with a desperate look on his face.

Well, I guess this is just one of the ways that mercs get along.



The next morning came. Before the sun had fully risen, I went to the garage to pick up my proton torpedoes. As I did so, I inquired about what had become of the gang of extroverts.

The marquess's daughter had apparently appealed on the basis of her father's name. It hadn't worked on the count, and apparently, daddy marquess had severed his ties with her.

Her buddies had ended up in similar situations. Along with the marquess's daughter, they were all regular soldiers—the girl's rank was captain, and the others were all ranked lieutenant or second lieutenant. They'd apparently be subject to a court martial.

Furthermore, because they had tried to defy even that decision and had run away, their charges were going to be even more severe.

Well, I quess that's what you'd expect after what they did.

Though it was still early in the morning, there were still plenty of people already hard at work. Some were cooking in the mess hall while others offered up meals at the food stalls. In particular, the proprietors of the food stalls seemed to want to make some sales while the going was still good. Either way, they were all going to close up shop after serving breakfast.

Not wanting to waste this chance, I got some breakfast and sat down at one of the tables provided to eat it. But then, someone sat down right in front of me.

At first, I wondered if it was Mr. Hero, but it was someone else. And although it was someone else, they were still one of the last people I wanted to see.

Have you ever heard someone say, "He is, without exaggeration, very handsome?" To someone like me, a person who had no interest in entertainers or actors, even I would describe the guy who'd just sat down across from me as "Ah, yeah, I guess he is handsome."

Incidentally, there apparently were also girls who were, without exaggeration, beautiful, but I'd never met one.

Anyway, this fellow looked to be about high school age, but unlike that gang of extroverts who'd been wearing their own clothes, he was wearing a proper military uniform. I could tell that he was either one of the garrison troops or one of the count's private soldiers.

After sitting down, he began to talk in a fairly loud voice. "Yesterday was really rough..."

What? Why's he talking to me all of a sudden...? No, he must be talking to someone else.

For someone like me, who was kind of socially awkward, I found it extremely distressing when strangers suddenly spoke to me. The best possible outcome was that they were actually talking to someone else.

There really was no reason this guy should be talking to me, but...

"My family is full of soldiers, you see," he said, continuing. "My father, my grandfather... All the men love to drink, but most can't handle their booze. So it's always really rough having to pick up after them, and look after them until

they're sober again... But I do respect them, so it's not like I can yell at them... Ugh..."

After rattling off a litany of complaints with a pretty weary expression, the mystery pretty boy let out an emphatic sigh.

I could kind of understand what he was sighing about.

For a minor, having to accompany people who were drinking would be boring, and if those people were relatives too, it would be all the harder to get away. Moreover, they also outranked him as soldiers, so he could hardly reprimand them.

Even so, why would he off-load those complaints on me? We've only just met.

Is this one of those things? Is he waiting for me to ask him, "What's wrong?" If so, this guy's going to be a real nuisance.

Maybe he has no one else to complain to and just wants to get these things off his chest. But if that's the case, I'd prefer he did so in a slightly lower voice. And I think he'd probably better get to a hospital ASAP.

Well, given that he's here, he must have been part of yesterday's operation too. He's clearly having a hard time. I guess I'll let it slide.

I finished my meal about five minutes later. Deciding to leave the pretty boy with his problems, I left.

I was worried someone might accost me on my way back to my ship, but it was still early morning, and on top of that, most of the combatants from yesterday were asleep after getting blind drunk. They wouldn't be up for a little while yet.

So, I decided to hotfoot it back to my ship. I quickly climbed inside and left Planet Teura behind.



Aside: Fialka Tielsad

Yesterday was dreadful.

That was because, despite the fact that we were still on a battlefield where

combat had just taken place, the media wasted no time in swarming me.

They wouldn't stop asking questions, and I wouldn't have minded if they'd been asking serious ones.

Like "How did the battle go?" for example. Or "Did you get any sense of your enemy's motives?" Even "Do you think there'll be another offensive?" would've been fine.

Instead, they asked questions like "What clothing brands do you like?" And "What do you like in a member of the opposite sex?" Along with "Do you have a boyfriend?"

All of their questions were firmly in the realm of gossip. I really hated it.

At this moment, Shelley and I had gone to greet Count Icolai, who had taken command of the army during the recapture operation. He was acquainted with my father, Olbart Tielsad, and I had also met him many times during my childhood. While his face was scary, I always thought he seemed very kind.

Incidentally, I recalled that the first time I met his son, Tony Icolai, he had flipped my skirt up, and I'd slapped him with all my strength.

I thought his father might've gotten angry at me, but the reality was quite the opposite. Instead, I distinctly remembered how he'd yelled, "How dare you flip a girl's skirt up?!" to Tony Icolai and then rapped him on the head with his knuckles.

As I was reminiscing about that encounter, we were just coming up to a row of stalls where there were tables and chairs set up when Shelley suddenly stepped in front of me as if to protect me.

"Hold on, Shelley, what's the matter?" I asked.

"That man."

I followed her gaze and saw a boy—likely still a student—with a handsome face and in a military uniform that I'd never seen before.

"What could that boy have done?"

"That man is the Blue Hornet," she said. "I confirmed this when his ship returned and he disembarked."

"Hrmm..."

Having heard the boy's identity from Shelley, I suddenly felt rage boiling inside of me.

Since we were both mercenaries, there were always going to be times when we would end up on opposing sides in battle. I couldn't complain if he later turned up as an ally. However, I was still frustrated about losing to him in a dogfight.

And above all, I was infuriated by the fact that he had tried to shoot me down before I could finish using my escape pod. That'd been a cowardly act that was now expressly forbidden.

You might think that I was being naive and I should expect that kind of thing on the battlefield, but we did at least have some rules—even in war. I could hardly be blamed for getting angry at someone who couldn't even follow those.

If he wanted to pick a fight with me, I would be happy to take him on, but there was no need for me to walk into trouble on purpose. He looked a little tired, and there were already quite a few girls cuddling up to him too, so I decided to let him be.



# **Extra Chapter: My Peaceful Day**



#### Aside: Scuna Nosweil

In order to get used to driving the new machine my Planet Racing team, Crystalweed, had purchased—a specialty model called the Violet Donna from the Triea Manufacturing Company—I'd gone to Planet Lamidan. This planet was about 12,700 kilometers in diameter, 40,000 kilometers in circumference, and its seas rose about 10,000 to 20,000 meters (10 to 20 kilometers) above its crust, so there really wasn't anywhere that could be called "land" here.

Once my test-drive was over, I went to a colossal city that sat on a levitating platform. It was known as Hepta, and it hovered about ten thousand meters above the surface of the ocean.

This city would provide our accommodations for the visit. And there was also a restaurant here where I was planning to treat Aero and Fino to dinner.

"Really... I can't believe you lost your balance at the last corner..." said Aero. She was wearing pumps, a formfitting miniskirt with a slit down the side, and an off-the-shoulder blouse. She'd paired this with sunglasses to make it a disguise.

"Looks like trying to shave a few seconds off my time backfired..." I said.

As for me, I was wearing pumps and long pants. I also wore a one-shoulder blouse that I'd bought with Aero along with a beret. To disguise myself, I was also wearing sunglasses.

"Um... Are you sure it's all right for me to come along?" another voice asked.

While Aero was grinning at me, Fino Foldepp—our new mechanic—trailed along behind her almost apologetically.

Fino was a girl with chestnut-brown hair that she wore in a short ponytail. She had joined our team after we'd crossed paths during the gate assault incident in the Sardal sector. Today, she was wearing pumps, a flared skirt, and a blouse—a

pretty cute outfit.

While Aero and I had felt the need to wear some kind of disguise, she was safe to go out without one.

Anyway, despite being small and having a pretty adorable air about her, she was quite skilled as a mechanic and had already distinguished herself within our team.

However, her most distinguishing feature had only emerged later on. Perhaps the clothes she wore had a slimming effect because we never noticed this about her when she was wearing them, but when we had been changing in the shower room, we'd discovered that her bustline was enormous.



Even Aero—someone who had a terrible habit of burying her face in other people's chests and rubbing against them—had been so overwhelmed by the size of Fino's bust that she had been unable to do anything but bow down and worship it.

"Hey, no worries! Of course our number one racer has deep enough pockets to cover you too! Besides, I did just cause you some trouble..."

When we had been out for our test-drive, Aero had egged me on to race her. I'd lost. But while she had been busy crowing over her victory against me, she'd run her vehicle into the wall of a levitating pit stop, which had created a lot of unnecessary work for Fino.

By way of apology, Aero had invited Fino to dinner.

While we were chatting, we arrived at Steakhouse Elnat, the restaurant Aero had reserved.

It had a reputation as being one of the tastier steakhouse chains, but it was also a chain that we would have opportunities to visit on other planets.

Perhaps Aero had made a reservation under my name, because the staff gave us special treatment and showed us to a private dining room.

But before we got there, our cover had been blown, and Aero and I suddenly had fans begging us for handshakes and autographs.

Since we were meant to be enjoying some private time, I felt like we could probably refuse them. But I was somewhat partial to Aero's opinion that "They've been nice enough to cheer us on, so there's no reason to come off so cold," so Aero and I cheerfully fulfilled their requests.

However...

"Look! Those are the Planet Racers Scuna Nosweil and Aero Zerulia Tinks!"

"Seriously?! We might not get another chance. Let's get close to them now!"

While the other customers were all patiently waiting in line for their turn, two men came out of one of the private rooms and pushed past the line to get to us.

"You seem to be passionate about fan service. How about servicing us?" one said.

"Yeah, yeah. You gotta take care of your fans!"

The two men both reeked of alcohol. One of them grabbed Aero's arm, and the other grabbed mine.

One of the female staff members attempted to stop them. "Sirs! What you're doing is a nuisance to the other customers, so please stop!"

"Shut up!"

"Eeek!"

But the man who'd grabbed hold of my arm kicked her and sent her flying. So, I upset the man's footing with a sweep of my own foot. Then, I used the arm he'd seized to wrench his joints out of place before throwing him to the floor face-first. I restrained him by kneeling on his neck.

"Urgh!"

"You shouldn't engage in meaningless violence," I said.

"You bitch! What are you doing?!"

When the man who had grabbed Aero's arm saw this, he let go of her with the intention of hitting me to save his buddy. Aero took this opportunity to sweep one his legs out from under him and grab his arm. She threw him with enough force that he performed a full turn in the air before slamming into the floor.

"Gurk!" cried the man, and in the very next moment, he lost consciousness.

"I guess we'd better call the police and an ambulance."

I asked the staff to take care of contacting emergency services.

"D-Damn you..." said the man I was restraining, but he sneered at me obscenely. "If you dare call the police, I'll expose your violent acts to the media!"

In other words, he was saying that if we didn't want the mass media to know we'd inflicted violence on him and his friend, we'd better let them go.

But Aero just smiled. "Go right ahead. If people find out that we kicked the asses of some punks like you, we might get some applause, but we certainly won't be criticized."

The police arrived swiftly, and the men protested, claiming, "All we did was try and talk to them, and they suddenly threw us to the ground." But Fino and a number of other customers had filmed the whole thing, so they were instantly exposed as liars. The men were promptly arrested and escorted away.

Aero had probably only been able to talk so big because she knew someone had been filming.

Then, once the police had left, we decided to leave too as we blamed ourselves for bothering everyone else in the restaurant. However, a man who looked like the owner came over along with a few other staff members, and they lined up in front of us and bowed their heads.

"Miss Nosweil. It is our responsibility to deal with problem customers, but you ended up bearing the brunt of their misdeeds. We are truly sorry."

"No, no, if we'd only moved to our private room sooner, none of that would have happened..."

And thus, the staff and I proceeded to exchange bows.

"What are you talking about? It's those men who deserve the blame! Neither we nor the staff did anything wrong!" Aero said firmly with a smug look on her face.

"We are sincerely grateful to hear you say that. Though this may not suffice as an apology, we would like to offer all three of you our Special Deluxe All-Meat Full-Course Dinner, compliments of our restaurant," the owner said, which was followed by another polite bow from him and the rest of the staff.

"Really?! Then we shall gladly accept!" said Aero in a singsong voice.

As she was celebrating, I put my hand on her shoulder and whispered into her ear. "Hey. Didn't we reserve the Standard Steak Full-Course Dinner?"

"I-It's free now anyway, so who cares..." said Aero evasively, as she also

averted her eyes from me.

Though it wasn't as if we couldn't afford the Special Deluxe All-Meat Full-Course Dinner, we would still notice the money missing from our wallets later, so we had definitely agreed to choose a more reasonably priced option.

"All right, then I suppose we'll count this as my treat for having lost our little race!" I declared, putting both of my hands on Aero's shoulders.

"Okay... We'll call it even..."

Since she was the one who'd ordered us such an expensive meal without asking, she didn't have a leg to stand on.

By the way, the Special Deluxe All-Meat Full-Course Dinner was absolutely delicious.

"We wouldn't be enjoying this right now if I hadn't ordered it! You should thank me!"

In the end, not only had Aero not learned her lesson, but now, she was even more full of herself...

# **Afterword**

To those I've met before, hello.

And if this is our first time meeting, pleased to meet you.

My name is Toryuu.

I'd like to talk to you about Shelley, who appeared in illustrations for the first time in this volume. I had always imagined that her eyes didn't have irises—they were more like lenses embedded in her face. Basically, they had a slightly more mech-y appearance.

However, I received a certain suggestion from my editor. "That won't be cute; let's not do that." But I was fairly insistent about my vision, so our negotiations came to a standstill. At that point, we agreed to leave it to Hamu-sama, our illustrator, to provide us with an initial drawing.

When I saw the completed artwork, my own vision seemed to fly away somewhere. I had an abrupt change in attitude, gave them my OK, and understood just how powerful an illustration can be.

Furthermore, when I was shown the first rendering of (Miss?) Alphonse Zaystall, one of the love interests (maybe?) in volume 2, I found the character design to be quite elegant. If someone who looked like that was kind to Yuri when he was having a rough time, I could see how he'd be swept off his feet and not realize Alphonse was a boy, even when Alphonse was wearing a men's uniform.

To O-sama, my editor, who pointed out many issues I couldn't see from my own perspective.

To my illustrator, Hamu-sama, who brought out more of my characters' charms than I could have imagined.

And above all, to all of my readers, my sense of gratitude is inexhaustible.

I hope you will continue to support me in the future.













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by Toryuu

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