

01

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THE DORKY NPC MERCEENARY

KNOWS HIS PLACE



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"Hey!
Which one
do you think
I should
choose?"

For now,
I decided
to leave
Rossweisse
to her fit of
merriment
and went
back to my
light novel.

"Albert seems
like a better
partner as a
battlecraft
pilot, whereas
Kielect seems
like someone
I just have
to protect!
Ah, but..."

John Ouzos

A Knight-rank mercenary. Became a mercenary because of an incident that occurred in high school but also because his father was unemployed and in debt.

Fialka Tielsad

A Bishop-rank female mercenary. Alias "Léopard." Fully aware of John's true prowess, she resents him for his disinterest in moving up the ranks and for taking abuse lightly.

Scuna Nosweil

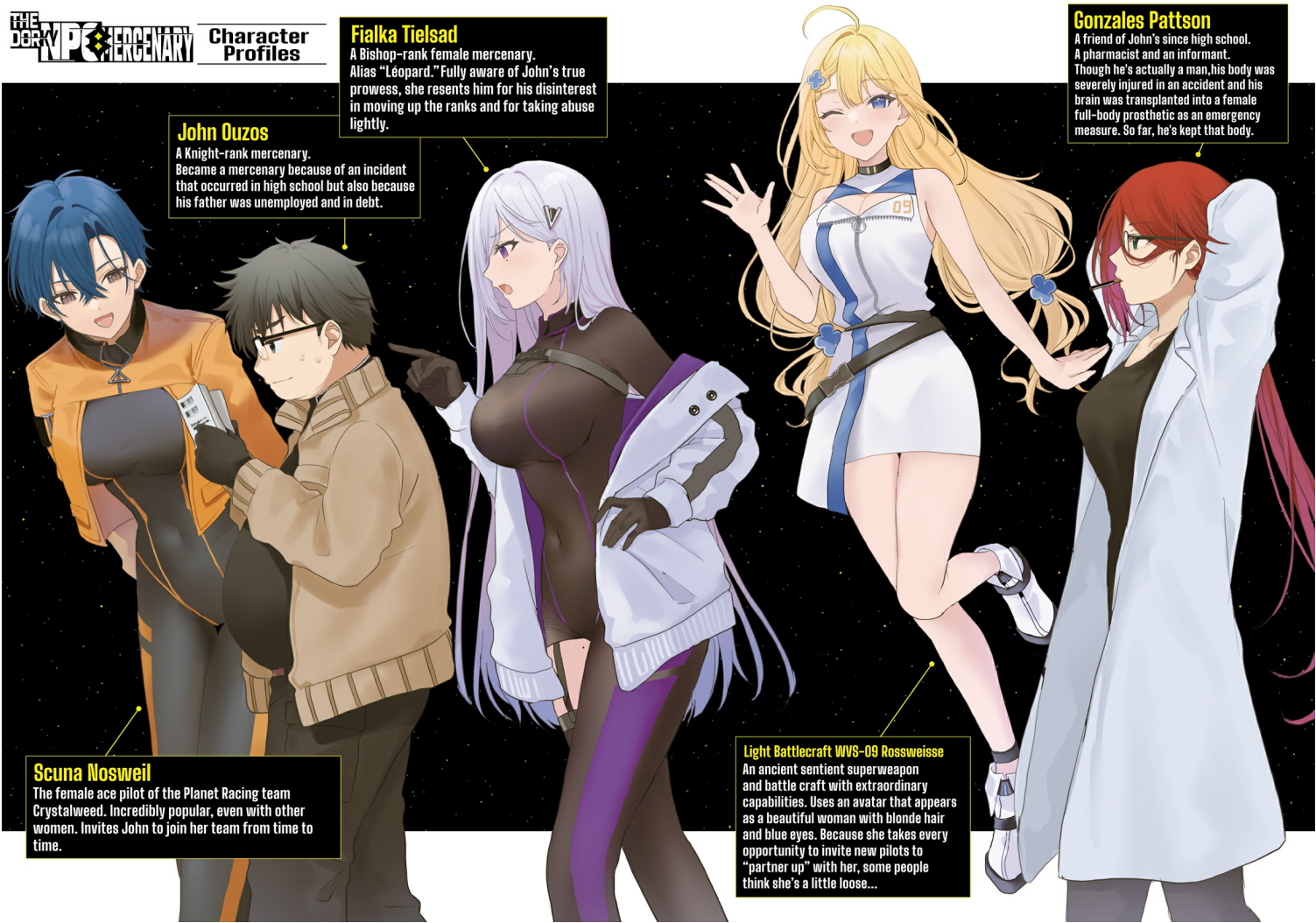
The female ace pilot of the Planet Racing team Crystalweed. Incredibly popular, even with other women. Invites John to join her team from time to time.

Light Battlecraft WVS-09 Rossweisse

An ancient sentient superweapon and battle craft with extraordinary capabilities. Uses an avatar that appears as a beautiful woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. Because she takes every opportunity to invite new pilots to "partner up" with her, some people think she's a little loose...

Gonzales Pattson

A friend of John's since high school. A pharmacist and an informant. Though he's actually a man, his body was severely injured in an accident and his brain was transplanted into a female full-body prosthetic as an emergency measure. So far, he's kept that body.



Why is she
always so
angry...?
Gotta say, I'm
impressed.
You'd think
she'd get
tired of it.

**“Gathering
information
is vital, but
you’re taking
too long!
Can’t you
make a quick
judgment?
Don’t tell me
that shady
woman has led
you astray?”**

**“Which
side are you
taking?”**



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NPC No. 1: “Bwa ha ha!!! My fleet has dominated yours! You should’ve handed over your daughter at once, you foolish excuse for a baron! Since you worked so hard to resist me, I’ll be sure to take really good care of her once I’ve seized her!”

My name is John Ouzos. I’m a mercenary. When most people hear the word “mercenary,” they think it sounds like a cool job, but that’s only true for a handful of people.

In order to have the kind of career people might write about, first of all, you absolutely have to be a gorgeous guy or girl.

The spaceship you travel in has to be a prototype, the kind of bleeding-edge vehicle that no one yet has managed to master. If it’s not, it should be a sentient superweapon unearthed from some ruin.

After you’ve managed to pilot that ship with flair, you’ve got to go and destroy a combined enemy fleet with just that single ship.

Or maybe you could infiltrate a planetary fortress all by yourself and take out everyone inside.

Or you could build a massive mercenary organization that belongs to no one state.

I’m talking about the kinds of people who have all kinds of suspicious stories passed around about them. Stories where you can’t tell what’s true or false.

Those people exist in a different dimension from me—a chubby nerd with glasses, the pilot of a secondhand (though modified) ship, and someone whose only role was to serve as a cannon-fodder NPC.

That’s who you should picture as I tell you that I was one of those in attendance under Count Baccahoa’s command in the Fuiga Sector as we

prepared to engage in combat with Baron Jeemas's forces.

At that time, the Galactic Empire was at the very height of a series of internal conflicts, like a pair of nobles with the same rank fighting over who had higher status, for instance.

They started wars for pathetic reasons, like over whether one of the commanders would hand over some old antique for another.

They really were morons.

And, proving that he was no exception, Count Baccahoa had taken a liking to Baron Jeemas's one and only daughter (who, by the way, was young enough to be the count's daughter as well), deciding that he'd have her as his mistress. He had ordered the baron to hand her over.

If I turned this ship around and smashed right through the bridge of the flagship, would that old bastard die?

Well, it was my mistake to choose this job without confirming all the details first.

Oh, and at that moment, Count Baccahoa was giving a speech to all the ships under his command. He was saying that this attack was retribution for Baron Jeemas having insulted him...but we all knew the truth, dammit!

Now then, since the count was probably just about done with his speech, it was time for us to prepare for battle.

Once the operation commenced, I would retreat to a distant corner of the combat zone, launch a few conservative attacks, then run like hell.

That was the strategy I'd decided on in order to survive.

"All right! That's the fourth ship I've shot down!"

One hour had already passed since the start of the battle. Keeping to the far end of the combat zone, I'd somehow managed to stay alive.

"I guess that this area's under control, huh."

Saying that line would no doubt trigger an event, but somehow, I wasn't at all worried.

A moment later, however, I received an all-hands transmission:

"Calling all ships in the left-wing backup unit! Head to the center of the formation to provide backup! We're being overrun!"

Appearing on the ship's monitor was the face of Lieutenant Galben, one of Count Baccahoa's private army officers who had been tasked with heading up our unit of mercenaries.

He was a good guy, but if I had to have a commander, why couldn't it have been a cute lady soldier? I wouldn't have had any problem with the commander in charge of the whole operation being a pretty woman either. But in reality, we had this old bastard who was starting to go stale.

"Huh?! What happened to everyone in the center unit?" I wondered aloud. "If I remember right, one of them was being cocky and said, 'I can easily handle this school of small fry on my own! Just stay out of my way, cannon fodder!'"

I had only been talking to myself, but Lieutenant Galben still gave me a sensible answer.

"You mercenaries in the backup fleet are still holding strong, but we regular troops have been torn to shreds. And the pilot you're referring to hasn't even taken down a single ship."

That being said, while it was by no means rare to fail to shoot down even one ship during a battle, after having been that arrogant, it seemed pretty lame.

For the time being, I decided to head to the center of the fray. After loping there with all due haste, I found that the center of the formation was in really rough shape. Though the support troops were making some headway as they vied for control, the regular troops were in tatters.

Or maybe I should say that if the mercenaries hadn't been here to provide support, they would have been screwed.

As for Mr. Cocky, he was whizzing around the battlefield, dragging thirty or forty enemy ships on his tail.

“Wow, that’s insane! In that situation, I guess you really can’t find time to return fire...”

Because Mr. Cocky had become a target for so many enemy vessels, he’d created a wide safe zone for friendly ones. However, the fact that he had managed to avoid being shot down despite being chased by so many enemies had to be at least partly due to his own ship’s performance.

That was exactly what one might expect of Mr. Cocky, our story’s protagonist. He liked to show off.

By the way, when I said I had loped to the fray, that might have sounded like I had really moved sluggishly and without hurrying at all. But if you were to look the word up, you’d find that it means to take long strides—in fact, it shares its roots with the word “leap”—so in fact, I had gotten there in quite a hurry.

Putting that aside, I decided to start dispatching the ships sticking to Mr. Cocky’s tail!

There were other support troops beside me who had moved to shoot down the enemies who were after him too.

But...I shouldn’t have let my guard down just because of that.

I ended up getting blasted at from behind. And even though I somehow managed to dodge that first attack, I couldn’t let things carry on like this.

What I was going to do would put some strain on my craft, but I had to do it!

First, with my ship flying at full throttle, I would lure my enemy to come right up close to my rear. Once they were behind me, I would pull up the nose of my craft, open a thruster at the base of the ship (normally used for attitude control) at full blast for an instant, and then cut my main booster. I’d need to time these operations carefully to perform them simultaneously.

After doing that, my craft would spin while the opposing ship flew right past me. And if I fired my beam just as they went by, my opponent would definitely take some damage.

In other words, my ship would do a loop-the-loop in order to catch the enemy unaware from behind. It was a standard tactic, but the sight of my ship’s nose

suddenly rising would make it look as if their attack had hit home and my fuselage had buckled.

We liked to call this a Shot-Down Fake-Out. And my opponent fell for it—hook, line, and sinker.

While I was doing that, the left wing of the support troops had arrived as well. With these additional forces, Count Baccahoa's side suddenly had the advantage at the center of combat.

Baron Jeemas's forces had dwindled in both wings of their formation, so their morale must have fallen too.

The bogies stuck to Mr. Cocky now numbered fewer than ten ships, and once Count Baccahoa's forces had the advantage, something incredible happened.

Count Baccahoa's flagship emerged from the head of the fleet, firing its main cannon as it came forward.

Not only that, but in another all-hands transmission—this time addressed to both friend and foe—he had the following ridiculous words to say: “Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!! My fleet has dominated yours! You should've handed over your daughter at once, you foolish excuse for a baron! Since you worked so hard to resist me, I'll be sure to take really good care of her once I've seized her!”

Ah, now there's a death flag.

The very moment I thought that, one of the last vessels still tailing Mr. Cocky launched a kamikaze attack on the bridge of Count Baccahoa's flagship. The enemy made a beeline for it and rammed right into the flagship.

The attack was so swift that none of the count's allies had time to react. And neither did the others on the enemy side, for that matter.

I really hadn't expected anyone to try something like that. It'd probably been some boy soldier who'd taken a fancy to the baron's daughter.

After taking that kamikaze attack, the flagship didn't quite go down, but its bridge was so badly damaged that it barely retained its original shape. If it so happened that the count and those around him had decided to push their luck

and not wear spacesuits, they would've gone to hell right there and then.

Moments later, I received the following message:

“Ah, this is Lieutenant Galben, presently the highest-ranking officer in the fleet. Count Baccahoa and Commander Scantan have perished, making it impossible for our forces to continue this battle. Calling all officers—cease hostilities at once! This idiotic battle is nothing more than a waste of life!”

After this new all-hands transmission from Lieutenant Galben, who had been aboard another ship, everyone stopped fighting.

NPC No. 2: “But I refuse!”

Some time had passed since the end of that battle.

From Baron Jeemas’s side, no blame was set at the feet of the mercenaries, though the Baron’s people apparently had demanded an apology and an enormous sum of money from Count Baccahoa’s family as compensation.

It was partly thanks to this decision that the mercenaries who had been hired by Count Baccahoa were able to return to the count’s base and resupply. However, since I’d pulled a Shot-Down Fake-Out, I would either need to take my ship to a dedicated maintenance dock or spend hours overhauling it myself.

As a technique, the Shot-Down Fake-Out put a heavy burden on my secondhand, modified ship, and I was concerned about pulling it off again with my craft in its current condition.

I had already received my payment for the battle, so I could leave at any time with no problems, but I always tried to leave a bit later than others. If we all tried to leave at the same time, there would be too much competition in the area. I really didn’t want to get into an accident. That may have made me sound like a wuss, but it was preferable to possibly causing an incident and earning the hostility of my fellow mercenaries.

As I was hanging back and watching the other ships leave, I got an unexpected call.

“Yes, hello, who is this?” I asked.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. This is Rossweisse, the light battlecraft WVS-09. Am I correct in thinking that I have connected to Mr. John Ouzos’s ship, the Patchwork, and that I am speaking with Mr. John Ouzos, that ship’s captain?”

Appearing on my communications monitor was a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was, at any rate, freaking gorgeous. She looked like the kind of woman who would definitely never speak to me unless she was a

receptionist, hawking something, or running some kind of romance scam.

Having received a call from someone who looked like that, and who was a complete stranger to boot, I could only expect the worst.

“Yes...” I began. “You’re certainly not mistaken, but may I ask why you are calling?”

I wished that I’d said that she had the wrong person, but given that she already knew my call number, that probably wouldn’t have worked.

“Of course. Let me speak frankly. How would you like to take me as your next partner?” she asked.

Her partner?

I’d never had a girlfriend in my life, so the offer of a “next” partner was jumping the gun.

Perhaps she could see the confusion in my expression because Miss Rossweisse (or whatever she called herself) continued speaking.

“I am the light battlecraft WVS-09, Rossweisse. To put it in your terms, I am a sentient superweapon who has been unearthed from the ruins of an ancient civilization.”



“Eh?”

What the hell is this knockout on my screen saying?

A sentient superweapon? If that’s true, then this is one heck of a find! It’d fetch a nice sum if it was ever on the market!

But I knew that I shouldn’t be willing to believe a story like that too easily.

Besides, most importantly...

“Hold on, hold on! Supposing you *are* telling the truth, don’t you already have a partner?” I asked.

Come to think of it, Rossweisse was the name of Mr. Cocky’s ship, so I guessed it’d be her name too, by extension. But what was she thinking, talking about betraying the current owner of the ship?

Rossweisse, the sentient superweapon, displayed an expression of abject anger. “To put it bluntly, my present pilot—Lambert Reargraz—is all talk and a total wuss!” she yelled. “For a time, I was stored in an old warehouse in a small country town on Planet Raza. The warehouse owner’s grandson turned out to be Lambert Reargraz, but even though when we first met he made all kinds of boasts, like ‘I am the strongest mercenary!’ and ‘No one can pilot a ship faster than I can!’ he had only been a mercenary for a week. This was even his first battle! Furthermore, outside of training simulations, he’d never even piloted a ship before!”

“Even so, I think it’s still impressive that he managed to draw such a large number of enemy ships without getting shot down. Don’t you?”

So Mr. Cocky is still a rookie...

Well, he’s definitely still one of the protagonists. If he managed to use his hidden talents so well, I think that’s plenty impressive for his first battle.

But Miss Rossweisse still looked displeased.

“The man in question was so alarmed when a beam hit his barrier at the start of the battle that he fainted and wet himself. I had to pilot myself. But since part of my attention was dedicated to controlling the cleaning machine sanitizing the pilot’s seat and the floor, I was unable to attack anyone,”

Rossweisse snapped.

I bet it must have been quite unpleasant for her pilot to have an accident inside of her...

“Well...I guess that happens a lot with new recruits.”

“What about your first battle, Mister Ouzos?”

“Well, I suppose I didn’t faint or wet my pants. Though the less said about my results in that battle the better,” I admitted.

“In other words, you had more of the right stuff, both as a mercenary and as a warrior!”

“No, I don’t think we can say that. He might still undergo dramatic improvements.”

Miss Rossweisse started to get worked up about her pilot’s failures as she continued to press me for an answer. This had been his first battle, though—what could she expect?

“Regardless, all of my functions outclass that ship of yours by several hundredfold! If you partner with me, you can have all the glory and splendor you desire!” she said.

“True, I’d like to have a ship as great as that.”

“Of course you would, of course you would! ♪”

In fact, if she really *was* a sentient superweapon unearthed from the ruins of an ancient civilization, her performance would be superb. I’d certainly be able to handle any present-day battlecraft in a fight. Heck, I could probably even battle an entire fleet.

If I could master a vessel like that, I would be able to have a storied career as a mercenary.

And so, I said...

“But I refuse!”

“Eh?”

Of course I refused! You’ve got to be kidding me! If someone like me piloted an

amazing ship like that, I'd only be tempting fate!

People might say, "A treasure like that would be wasted on someone like you. We'd make better use of it."

Or maybe, "You must have threatened her to get her to listen to you, right?! We'll set her free at once!"

If I got really unlucky, they might even blow my head off as soon as I disembarked!

And so I had refused.

I was resolved and I knew my place—I'd continue to live beyond my means *in a role beneath my abilities*.

At any rate, it really would be a waste for me to pilot that ship.

A ship like that is supposed to be piloted by a heartthrob hunk or a knockout beauty. Someone with the qualities of a protagonist!

"This is all to say that I'm not interested in piloting you," I said. "Please make do with your current partner."

"But why?!" she whined. "Don't you know that, at this point in time, I am the finest and strongest vessel in the galaxy?! Don't you know I'm invincible?! We could make a lot of money together!"

Rosswisse desperately continued her appeal. She listed her many advantages, but they all looked like disadvantages to me.

A ship as powerful as her had a high chance of being sent to especially harsh battlefields. She'd be a high-priority target for enemies.

I know I keep repeating myself, but that burden ought to be shouldered by a hunk or a beauty—someone with the qualities of a protagonist! A dorky NPC mercenary like me shouldn't have to shoulder all of that.

"Anyway, I won't be needing you—"

"Wait a minute! I beg you to reconsider—"

"Please try and get along with Mr. Cocky," I said before cutting off the transmission.

Even imagining the looks someone like me would get if he ever tried piloting a ship like that made me shudder.

The life of a mercenary was one where you never knew when you might die. If you developed too high of an opinion of yourself, got carried away, and stuck out like a sore thumb, you'd only shorten your own life expectancy.

Therefore, it was vital to maintain an environment and use equipment that was appropriate for your stature.

In order to survive, an NPC like me had to avoid standing out. I had to act in a cowardly manner and never seek glory.

Only the hunks and beauties could afford to stand out, act flashy or heroic, and seek glory and splendor if they wanted to survive—those people had the means to be a protagonist.

An NPC shouldn't even pursue such things.

Knowing your place would also increase your chances of surviving on the battlefield.

As I reflected on that fact once again, I suddenly became aware of a commotion brewing outside. Out of curiosity, I decided to take a look.

"Screw you! I'm your owner! How dare you try to kick *me* out!"

"I can't take someone who fainted and peed himself *inside me* after taking one shot seriously as an owner!"

"Wha... How dare you! Screw you!"

It seemed like Miss Rossweisse and Mr. Cocky were having a fight. I could hear them clearly even though they had to be quite some distance away.

Still, they might want to watch what they say.

Since no one else in the dock had any way of knowing that Rossweisse was the ship's AI, they would no doubt all assume that what they were hearing was a couple engaged in a lovers' quarrel.

On top of that, some of their words could be interpreted as exposing intimate details, making their argument sound all the more vicious.

Well, it's better that I don't get involved.

Besides, since the ship's departure had been delayed by their lovers' quarrel, I decided to take the opportunity to leave the base myself.

After obtaining permission from the control tower, I gradually moved my ship towards the exit. Then, watching the dock in the corner of one eye as the lovers' quarrel continued to boil over, I opened my ship's throttle and left Count Baccahoa's base behind.

All right! Now I just need to get my ship overhauled ASAP and then I'm headed straight to the anime store!

NPC No. 3: “That sounds like your problem! And if she’s pretty, then I really have to say no!”

“As usual, there sure are a lot of people here...”

After finishing getting my ship overhauled (which my previous mission had made necessary), the next place I found myself was the Mercenaries Guild’s branch on Planet Ittsu, located in the Poeto Sector of the Galactic Empire.

Though it wasn’t quite on the scale of the headquarters on the Galactic Empire’s home planet of Hein, this was still a pretty big guildhall.

My reason for coming here was simple—to look for work.

After punching a number code for one of the job listings on the bulletin board into my handheld terminal, I took the device to the reception desk. I’d ask for more details there and decide whether or not to take the job.

Of course, I headed to a reception desk where no one else was lined up. It was manned by an old-timer.

If I had instead tried to line up at a desk with a beautiful young lady behind it, people would object.

“Hey! Losers like you don’t get to line up at her desk! Know your place!” someone would say, followed by them punching me.

Even if I were lucky enough to actually talk to the receptionist, even if we spoke about nothing besides the job, someone would definitely yell, “Hey, asshole! Can’t you tell you’re upsetting her? Get the hell outta here!” and I’d still end up getting punched.

For the time being, I decided to head to the old-timer’s desk. I was looking to take on the job I’d just found, which was to wipe out an apparently pretty small band of pirates who had been sighted many times in the neighborhood of late.

“I’d like to check this out,” I said.

“Hm? Oh, look who it is. You’d like to take on another job wiping out some pirate chumps, huh? You’re as dull as ever.”

The old-timer behind the desk was Antonio Lohnes. A former mercenary himself, he was marked by a dark complexion, a bald head, and a macho physique.

He was actually the guildmaster too.

Just kidding—he was a normal employee of the guildhall, working in reception.

“I don’t mind being dull. It’s better than throwing your life away on a gamble, right?” I countered. “Besides, even a job exterminating pirates can lead to death if you aren’t careful.”

“Well, yeah. It’s the number one reason new recruits get killed.”

He may have called the pirates chumps, but the combatants in question would stop at nothing to kill me. I couldn’t let my guard down.

In spite of that, a certain number of new mercenaries always underestimated pirates. They’d assume they were all chumps and end up as space dust after one unanticipated counterattack.

Well, as long as you weren’t stupid enough to troll the pirates, you’d find that their equipment was usually pathetic. It wasn’t too hard to wipe them out.

“But can this mission wait a little while?” the old-timer asked.

Normally he would have launched right into his explanation of the mission, but today, he didn’t do that.

“Why?”

“Well, actually, some noble’s daughter is about to be transported for a long-term stay away from home. They’re currently recruiting personnel to escort her. We’ve been told to assemble fifty mercenaries, but we’re short by one.”

“You’d like me to join so you can hit your quota?” I asked.

“That’s right. The pay isn’t bad, and if you’re one of fifty ships, the chances of you getting attacked are pretty slim.”

“Pass. Isn’t that just the kind of job that always leads to trouble?!”

It would be one thing if we were being sent as reinforcements to a battlefield, but fifty mercenaries were way too many for an escort!!! You might as well yell, “Come and attack me!” if you were going to stand out that much.

Besides, with that many mercenaries in one place, there’d definitely be some of the kind of people I hated to see—natural protagonists.

“Come now, why not take it on? If we don’t get the numbers, I’ll be in hot water. The young lady’s people have arranged to do the escort tomorrow. And I’ll have you know that the young lady herself is said to be quite the beauty.”

When a beautiful young noblewoman was involved, things didn’t turn out well in most cases. Even if the lady herself was a good person, she tended to be surrounded by ne’er-do-wells.

So no matter what the old-timer says, I have to refuse.

“That sounds like *your* problem! And if she’s pretty, then I really have to say no!” I said and instead submitted my application for the job to exterminate those pirate chumps.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll send you the details now,” said Old Man Lohnes. He let out a sigh of resignation before starting to process my application.

But in the middle of our negotiations, we were interrupted.

“Hey, asshole!” someone called out behind me.

What’s his deal? I wondered. Interrupting someone while they were discussing a job was considered pretty rude.

The moment I turned around with that on my mind, I was punched in the face.

The one who had hit me was a tall, slim, handsome fellow who looked to be in his late teens. He had a somewhat androgynous face and wore a sporty, elegant outfit that radiated cleanliness. He probably typically affected an expression dripping with confidence, but right now, the look on his face was one of violent rage.

What the heck is his deal?

Fortunately, I didn't end up falling over or kneeling on the ground despite having been hit. But even so, who the hell did he think he was, hitting me out of the blue?! This was my first time meeting the guy, and I couldn't remember ever having done anything to him.

Mr. Handsome didn't even pause to breathe after hitting me. He instead proceeded to insult me. "The woman who posted that job offer contacted the Mercenaries Guild because she wouldn't feel safe without fifty guards to escort her. Why won't you accept the job? And you call yourself a mercenary?! Anyone who'd turn it down is unqualified to be one! Resign at once, you cowardly dork!"

Ah, now I get it. This guy's got it in his head that mercenaries are heroes of justice, siding with the weak against the strong.

He was the kind of guy who probably wasn't going to listen to anything I or Old Man Lohnes had to say. Instead, he'd hang on to his beliefs with blind, unwavering faith.

As I agonized over what to do, Old Man Lohnes turned to Mr. Hero.

"Could I ask you not to fight inside the Guild? Also, your rank is Pawn, whereas he's a Knight. Besides the fact that he obviously outranks you, each mercenary is free to accept or refuse any job," Old Man Lohnes said, cautioning the young man in a fairly stern tone.

Mr. Hero sneered at me, ignored what the old man had to say, and kept up his narcissistic attitude. "I'm definitely stronger than this jerk, so I'd like you to raise my rank right this minute!"

"In that case, will you put your name down to be the final mercenary on that mission?" Lohnes asked.

"Of course I will!" Mr. Hero then slammed his guild card and portable terminal down on the counter.

"Head to the specified location by the prescribed time that's written here. Don't be late." Having given Mr. Hero that warning, Old Man Lohnes started processing his application.

Incidentally, the Mercenaries Guild had six levels of ranking for mercenaries

based on the degree of their contributions. They were named after the playing pieces used in chess. From lowest to highest, someone could be designated as a Pawn, Rook, Knight, Bishop, Queen, or King. Each rank also had a corresponding card color: green for Pawn, yellow for Rook, blue for Knight, white for Bishop, red for Queen, and black for King.

By the way, though you could advance as far as Knight with contributions alone, to become a Bishop, you were required to take an exam. And as Old Man Lohnes had said only moments ago, my rank was Knight. Exams were a pain, and I'd only draw attention if I moved up further. I had no intention of taking the test.

While I was thinking about that, Mr. Hero turned to glare at me again.

"Well, the client will be much happier to see me join than a cowardly dork like you anyway. Oh, and the next time I see you, I'll show no mercy, got it?!" After Mr. Hero had showered me in insults one more time, he finally left.

"What's his deal...? Ow ow ow..."

"He may be a rookie and just starting out, but he's taken on a lot of huge missions and succeeded each time. Well, I guess you'd say he belongs to the elite class, so much is expected of him," said Old Man Lohnes, explaining who my adversary was as I applied pressure to the place where he'd hit me. "But why didn't you fight back? You didn't even object."

"Well, there's no way he'd listen even if I did say something, right? And even if, for the sake of argument, I decided to press charges since there's a rule against violence within the Guild's walls, his fangirls would only crowd around to defend him. Even the judge in the tribunal might end up being swapped out for an older woman from among his fans."

From Mr. Hero's perspective, I was probably nothing more than a small-fry enemy from some evil organization. If I wasn't careful, he probably wouldn't hesitate to pull a gun on me. He could even try to ruin me socially.

"I agree with you about him," Old Man Lohnes admitted.

"I know you were under some pressure regarding that mission just now, but I'd be grateful if you refrained from offering me such missions in the future. All

right, let's carry on with the paperwork," I said and then presented my Wrist-Com (my wrist-mounted computer) to him.

"Yeah, yeah, got it," he said with a sigh and then returned to the application procedure.

NPC No. 4: “That lazy coward!”

No sooner had Old Man Lohnes resumed the application procedure than I became aware of someone standing nearby. And, just like had happened a moment ago, another voice rang out from behind me.

“Unbelievable. You just let that new recruit hit you and didn’t even try to fight back. And you call yourself a Knight-rank mercenary???”

The person who had addressed me in this irritated manner was a woman looking to be about 170 centimeters tall. She had beautiful long, straight silver hair and purple eyes like amethysts. With her porcelain-white skin and perfect figure, she was just the kind of bombshell beauty who shouldn’t have had anything to do with me.

Who was this beauty? Her name was Fialka Tielsad, a Bishop-rank mercenary. She was also known by the alias “Léopard”—as in Lady Leopard.

That wasn’t because she sported a pair of leopard ears or a tail or something. Rather, there was a leopard emblem painted on her battlecraft.

So, why was someone so amazing, someone who definitely belonged to my least favorite group—the protagonists—talking to the likes of me?

The reason was simple. She didn’t like me.

The first time we had met was while refueling at a base after we had both taken a job eradicating pirates under the military’s supervision. We’d just made some meaningless small talk at that time.

But when we had met a second time in the Mercenaries Guild’s own hangar, she’d had some words for me.

“Don’t you have any interest in advancement?! Lazy people like you are the kind of people I hate the most!” she had yelled at me that time.

Ever since then, each time we’d met, whether at the Guild reception or wherever else, she would always have a fresh barrage of insults for me, like

“Don’t you have any ambition?” or “You never take the bigger jobs, do you?”

As a result, people around us, especially the types I couldn’t stand—protagonists—started to object to the fact that she was talking to me in the first place. While I’d heard plenty of similar comments in the past, they had started to become even more irritating.

You might think, “Well, isn’t she just a tsundere?” That kind of thing only happens to protagonists in harem love stories, though—there was no chance of it occurring in my life.

Because of all that, I had a hard time dealing with her.

I tried to explain why I hadn’t fought back. “A guy like him would never listen to what I had to say. Even if I *did* press charges on the grounds that violence is prohibited inside the Guild, his fangirls would flock to defend him, and the judge in the tribunal might end up swapped out for one of his older lady fans. She might even throw *me* in jail instead. It’s best to just let guys like that get their aggression out.”

I stopped myself from adding, “But don’t you belong in the same camp as him?”

“Even so, are you really going to keep letting people make a fool out of you?”

“I’d rather stay out of trouble,” I responded.

That led her to glare at me with an extremely fierce look on her face. “Hmph! Then keep taking shabby jobs for pocket change, just as long as you can stay alive!” she spat out before exiting the Guild reception hall.

“Looks like Fialka—meaning Léopard—still hates you.”

“She’s got some kind of deep aversion to me. But if so, she can just not talk to me.”

Old Man Lohnes watched her depart with a look of exasperation.

For Fialka’s part, she was immediately approached by several men and women. The lady receptionist also seemed enraptured by the sight of her.

Admittedly, even I’d still have to describe her as an elegant young woman instead of a hunk with boobs.

But either way, she belonged to a totally different world than me, you know?



Aside: Fialka Tielsad

That man really makes my blood boil!

I recalled the events that had unfolded not too long ago as I took a shower.

Despite being a far more capable dogfighter than me, even to the point where it would not be strange for him to be ranked as a Queen, why is he satisfied being nothing more than a Knight-rank mercenary?!

No, I don't mean to disparage Knights.

Why doesn't he even try to rise to a position appropriate for someone of his abilities?!

It's true that those from aristocratic families are seriously overrepresented in ranks above Bishop. There's no doubt that he would be the target of a lot of harassment if he moved up too.

In fact, I'm the daughter of a viscount—and my father's a noblesse de robe with no planet of his own at that. Even I have received a lot of harassment due to my status, so I'm sure he would too.

However, I've silenced all of my critics by demonstrating my abilities!

He has more than enough skill to do the same—so why doesn't he?!

I slammed my fist against the wall of my shower cubicle quite violently. “That lazy coward!”



“Milady, is something the matter?!” Startled by the noise, my maid and android, Shelley, had rushed to the door and called out to me.

“Oh, sorry. It’s nothing,” I told her. I turned off the shower and opened the door before taking the bath towel Shelley was holding out for me. I wiped myself down with it. After putting on my bathrobe, I headed to the living room and sat down on the couch.

Shelley swiftly returned with a glass of iced coffee. I immediately brought the straw to my lips and drank it. The cold, bitter coffee soon calmed me down.

By the way, I was not at home—instead, I was on board Uklimo, a medium-class spaceship that was the mother ship of Eglim, the battlecraft I piloted. Fitted with its own storage for battlecraft and accommodation facilities, the mother ship made long-distance travel much easier. It also saved me from having to burn fuel for my battlecraft on my way to the battlefield.

“When you thumped the wall just now...were you thinking about Mister John Ouzos again?” inquired Shelley with a sigh. There was a note of disappointment in her voice.

She was a fully mechanical female android model. Her outward appearance was marked by an extremely smooth layer of sleek metal covering her entire body. The heat generated by her energy core almost seemed like natural body heat too. Overall, she gave the impression of a living human whose skin had been transmuted into metal somehow.

Atop her head, she had a smooth metallic plate that was shaped so as to imitate hair. If you ignored the fact that she had a single lens plate in place of her eyes, her face looked entirely human. Her mouth even moved when she spoke, and her expressions changed as well.

That being said, she did not need to breathe but instead imitated the movement. So, it’d only *looked* as if she had sighed just now.

Incidentally, I was sure to have her wear a maid uniform—I didn’t want to waste the opportunity.

“That man was struck by a new recruit in the guild who rained insults upon him,” I told her. “Not only did he not fight back, but he didn’t even object. Can

you believe it?!”

Just recalling the scene that had unfolded before my eyes caused my anger to bubble over once again.

“He even made excuses! ‘That kind of guy would never listen to what I have to say, and fighting back would only make me enemies in the guild, so it’s best to just let him work out his aggression!’”

I drank down the remaining iced coffee in one gulp.

“How can someone like that be so much better in a dogfight than I am? I can’t tell you how angry that makes me!”

Without even meaning to, I flicked my glass away with a finger.

“Well, could you not consider that integrity, in a way? It is said that a skilled hawk hides its talons and that the wise man must play the fool. The truly capable among us have no need to show off,” noted Shelley.

“I know that, but...”

I understood what Shelley was trying to say. There was no shortage of fools who, despite being far weaker than me in a dogfight, were also ranked as Bishops. They were always boasting about it.

Of course, a mercenary’s value could not be measured solely by their performance in a dogfight. But those people rankled me all the same.

Naturally, if I could just beat that man in a display of piloting prowess, I wouldn’t have these worries.

That being said, I was sure that if I suggested we have a mock battle, he would simply respond with “Ah, there’s no way I can beat you. Let’s just say that you win!”

“Just thinking about him makes me mad... Perhaps I should get to work instead. Have you managed to pick anything up?” I said to Shelley.

“Yes. Please have a look.”

Thinking to myself that I’d better find a way to blow off steam, I took the list of job requests from Shelley and started to peruse them.

NPC No. 5: “Ah, um... Whoever might be living in this asteroid, if you happen to be home, please respond.”

I finished resupplying and departed from the Guild the same day I accepted my next job.

My ship, the Patchwork, was built in a way that emphasized surveying, defense, and handling. Its speed and firepower were only about average.

Those folks in the protagonist camp thought that as long as they increased their ships' speed and firepower, none of their opponents' attacks would hit them since their enemies would be approaching them at a comparative snail's pace. They were also confident that they could pilot any ship perfectly, regardless of how peaky its performance might be. Those types didn't see the need to improve their ships in any other way.

However, for a small-fry NPC like me, things never turned out so well. I absolutely needed those three other elements in order to survive.

Incidentally, regarding that aforementioned request to gather fifty mercenaries, there were many aspects of that job that put me off of it other than the fact that I knew it'd involve the kind of attention seekers I couldn't stand.

Simply put, they were purely trying to recruit us as cannon fodder. The more people who flew in a mission, the more targets the enemy could fire upon. It would make their firepower so unfocused that it'd definitely be reduced in strength by the time it reached your own ship.

To give a common example, when someone already knows that someone else has it in for them and they can assume that they'll be the target of an attack during transport, some clients gather as many of us as possible to serve as meat shields. Claiming that a job was escorting a young noblewoman was a typical pretense.

The next most likely explanation was that the requester had hoped to pick out the most appealing mercenaries from a group, give them special treatment, and poach them for their own personal guard. With fifty of us, not only would there of course be some heartthrobs in the group, but some heartthrobs with boobs attached too. Some clients would gather as many mercenaries as they could in the hopes of scouting those characters.

And in that scenario, discrepancies in compensation were bound to occur.

This could be expected in the event that a mercenary had some specific accomplishments during the job, like shooting down an assailant or protecting the client from harm. It wasn't like that was never the case, but there were more nonsensical situations in which the client's favored people received increased payments and everyone else was subject to a decrease.

And, sometimes, the client just wanted to show off.

There were plenty among the aristocracy who just got a kick out of having so many guards in their escorts.

Back when I was still a rookie, there had been a high-ranking Guild employee from a noble family who, wanting to impress a client who was a young noblewoman, had forced me to join a mission like that against my will.

At the time, I had been singled out and pitted against the better-looking mercenaries, receiving a lot of nasty comments in the process. I had found myself on the brink of being used as cannon fodder.

What a terrible experience.

While I was thinking about that, I arrived at the sector that was apparently infested with pirates.

First, I commenced my search of the area.

A typical survey radar has a range of about one billion kilometers, but the Patchwork could survey up to twice that distance—two billion kilometers. That sentient battlecraft I had tangled with not too long ago—Rossweisse—might've been able to search as far as ten billion kilometers.

I focused my search on asteroid belts, deserted colonies, and clusters of

debris. I also considered the satellites around planets. One by one, I investigated all the areas that had signs of human activity. I also tried questioning people in the inhabited colonies and residential satellites in the region for more information.

After four days of exploring and investigating, I discovered an asteroid that was quite a bit larger than the others. If I'd come across it in an asteroid belt I wouldn't have thought anything of it, but when something of that size popped up in the middle of empty space, it was a hundred times more suspicious.

On top of that, I was also able to detect a thermal signature emanating from the asteroid.

In other words, there had to be something artificial inside it.

That being said, there were some people who outfitted asteroids and used them as homes in order to live as hermits. I needed additional confirmation.

If whoever's living in there is a stubborn old hermit, he might not cooperate. This could be a real pain in the ass.

Moreover, there were also cases where asteroids had been catapulted out of their belt due to some unforeseen calamity. But on those occasions, victims usually contacted the authorities immediately, and the police or the military would come to rescue them, meaning they weren't left alone for a prolonged period. However, if it had just been propelled out of its belt and appeared to be uninhabited, there was always a chance that the people living inside it were unconscious, or in the worst case, already dead.

Therefore, my first course of action was to contact the authorities on the nearest inhabited planet in the sector. I informed them of the asteroid's coordinates and checked whether or not there was any record of people living there. The authorities told me that they were unable to find any record of any inhabitants at those coordinates, nor had any of the asteroid houses in the nearest belt reported being catapulted outside.

In other words, someone was living there without permission, and the probability of it being a pirate base rose.

Even so, there was still a chance that a regular person was living there without permission. After preparing to raise my ship's barrier, I tried making contact with the asteroid on my open channel.

"Ah, um... Whoever might be living in this asteroid, if you happen to be home, please respond."

Five minutes passed, but there was no response.

"Erm...by residing at these coordinates, you present an obstacle to navigation according to regulations under the space navigation codes. We request that you promptly move your asteroid to another location and either complete the residence registration procedure or abandon it."

Incidentally, residing in an asteroid outside of an asteroid belt was totally prohibited. Any such asteroid would be treated as debris, so it wouldn't be a problem for me to destroy it.

Five more minutes went by.

That's too bad. Guess I'm gonna have to move on to my last resort.

"We don't seem to have received your response, so we will view this asteroid as uninhabited and carry out our disposal procedure. Destruction will commence in five minutes."

Usually when I say that, they panic and come out... Is there really nobody home?

Just as I thought that, the asteroid slowly began to move.

Looking carefully, I noticed that several thruster nozzles had suddenly appeared on the asteroid's surface. They had probably been retracted up until this point for camouflage.

"Looks like there's definitely someone in there."

I immediately raised my barrier and readied myself to deal with the unfolding situation.

The suspicious asteroid was gradually moving away from my ship.

I wasn't sure if they were trying to make a getaway or not, but supposing the

people inside weren't criminals, I was still going to need them to explain what they were doing there to the local police on the nearest inhabited planet. They'd need to pay for any crimes they might have committed.

"Ah, um! Before you depart, I'm going to have to ask you to explain your circumstances to the local police, so please stop!"

It wasn't like they'd attacked me, so I thought I should at least try to talk to them first. However, there turned out to be no need.

Light battlecraft emerged from the asteroid house—two of them, at that.

Confirming what I saw, I dropped my barrier for an instant and, after approaching the ships at high speed, fired a beam at them.

I had no intention of hitting them. It'd be enough to just fluster my opponents. Their objective was probably to slow me down for long enough to give the asteroid house time to escape.

So, while the ships were still wondering whether they should dodge my attacks or run away, I decided to launch an attack on the asteroid house itself. Even if the ships were to rush towards me to defend it, I would just dodge them and strike the asteroid directly.

Either way, if I could attack the asteroid house and land a hit on the nozzles that provided its thrust, that'd prevent it from moving and victory would be mine. The only thing that'd be left for me to do would be to shoot down those ships. And I knew they'd fetch a higher price if I turned them in with as little damage as possible, so I had to keep that in mind when shooting them down.

Anyway, I fired my beam, and the two battlecraft darted left and right to evade it. I then opened the throttle on my thrusters and, after approaching the asteroid house, landed a hit on one of the nozzles with my beam.

I saw the nozzle explode, but the asteroid house kept on moving. However, it was obvious to me that the only thing keeping it moving was inertia.

So, I quickly whirled around and fired my beam at the two battlecraft instead.

I really thought they'd just dodge, but one of them took a direct hit. After lurching back and forth for a moment, that ship stopped moving altogether.

“Damn it!” one of them yelled. “You’ll pay for what you did to Gate!”

The remaining ship flew towards me, but it wasn’t particularly fast.

Even my ship, the Patchwork, can manage faster speeds than that... But first things first—I’m callin’ the police.

“Ah... I’ve just called the police, so don’t try to resist any further,” I told them.

I was sure that they couldn’t do anything else, but I thought I’d give them some advice, just to be safe.

The pilots of the two ships yelled out.

“God damn it! After finally making some money as a pirate, I was hoping to stick it to my wife!”

“I... I even took a loan out to buy this thing... Damn it! Move, damn you! Move!”

No, I wouldn’t recommend taking off in that condition. It’s dangerous.

“I guess that’s how it goes. I told you things were going just a little too well up till now...”

But, y’know, they were so pitiful that I really was surprised they’d even managed to make it as pirates at all until now...

NPC No. 6: “We’re dealing with the family of a marquess. They won’t listen to us.”

The police arrived soon after and took the pirate band consisting of three old men away.

All three of these men had apparently been made redundant and found themselves as divorcés after their wives and children had finished making fools out of them.

Apparently, in order to stick it to their former families, they had banded together and gone into debt to purchase an asteroid house and battlecraft, starting new careers as pirates.

I didn’t know whether to call it tragic or what...

I guess you could say it was unlucky that they’d ended up finding some success when they had started out... You might say that they’d gotten a taste for it too.

Well, I guess it was fortunate that they hadn’t, well, massacred anyone, like some of the worst pirates would. The amount of money they had stolen was pitiful, so their criminal records really weren’t so terrible.

I discussed all this with Old Man Lohnes after returning to the Mercenaries Guild reception to collect my payment.

“It’s a tough world we’re living in...” I muttered, expressing the deep sense of understanding and pathos that this encounter had made me feel.

Although, I knew that if I’d been a protagonist, things would have gone differently.

Instead of being three old men, the pirates would have been three gorgeous sisters—the daughters of the boss of a dignified pirate band with a storied history. However, one of the boss’s subordinates would have betrayed him and would have told these daughters that if they did not become his women, they’d

all be killed. The three beauties would have only just managed to survive thanks to the help of a loyal retainer who had sacrificed his life for them.

And now, the sisters would've been amassing funds in order to exact their revenge on their father's traitorous subordinate.

On top of that, the three sisters would've decided to make a special exception upon meeting the protagonist, choosing to partner up with him on his quest.

Yeah, that's about how it would've gone.

Anyway, something else had been troubling me even before I started to talk about all the particulars of my mission.

"So, what's all *that* about?" I asked.

When I had arrived at the Guild, I'd spotted a few dozen mercenaries surrounding a high-ranking official.

"You remember the fifty-man mission? Only one of the mercenaries got paid—Mr. Hero," Lohnes began. "Not only that, but the money that was meant to be paid out to everyone was all given to him. The client, a marquess's daughter, mouthed off at the mercs she refused to pay, saying something like 'You didn't receive any payment because the job you did showed that you aren't trustworthy!'"

When I heard that, I couldn't believe my freaking ears.

Anyone who recruits that many people and doesn't pay them in advance has gotta have something wrong with them!

It sounded to me like the marquess's daughter had deliberately found fault with the other mercenaries to simply try and cover up the fact that she'd taken a liking to *someone* and was giving him special treatment.

"This is a big deal! Didn't the Guild object?" I asked.

"We're dealing with the family of a marquess. They won't listen to us."

Good thing I didn't take the job after all.

One of my mentors in the Guild had once told me "When it comes to missions from the aristocracy, unless they're pure combat you're better off not taking

them.”

“So...now they’re blaming the Guild big shot who took the initial order?” I said.

“Yeah, seems like it,” said Lohnes.

Is that big shot all the mercenaries are yelling at right now the one who managed that mission request?

“What about the guy who received all that special treatment? Did he quit being a mercenary and start working for the marquess’s daughter?”

Though the old man had never spoken about any job I wasn’t a part of in too much detail, I had to ask. There was no doubt in my mind that the young noblewoman’s favorite had been Mr. Hero.

“Nah. He turned her down, apparently, spouting some crap to the tune of ‘I’m a mercenary. There are other people I must save.’”

“Wasn’t she upset?”

“I hear the young lady is head over heels in love with him. She’s far from being mad—she was actually moved.”

Things really are different for guys in the protagonist camp, huh?

Normally, if you refused a request from the aristocracy, you ran the risk of being charged with the nonsensical crime of defaming a noble.

But in this case, because the marquess’s beloved daughter had fallen for Mr. Hero on the basis of his personality, character, and looks, he had been forgiven.

If an NPC like me had been in the same position, I’d have been sentenced to death on the spot.

Well, there was no reason I’d be favored by a client in the first place, so I wouldn’t have to worry about that.

But Mr. Hero, since you were talking about honor, you should have told her to pay everyone who participated, damn it! Didn’t you think the amount you got seemed like a little too much?

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve seen the favorite who got paid in

full...”

“He probably went home before he got surrounded by protesters too.”

That figures. Even the flow of time and crowds happened to favor those with the blessing of a protagonist.

But...how can I put it? I could understand why the marquess’s daughter had favored Mr. Hero. After all, he *was* Mr. Handsome, having all of a girl’s ideal qualities stuffed into one man. There weren’t too many guys who looked as squeaky-clean as that.

Nothing good could come of an NPC like me getting mixed up with such a perfect hero, one of only a handful of people who had been chosen by fate. It was best for me not to get involved.

“All done.”

While I was busy musing over all that to myself, Lohnes had finished the payment procedure.

Selling off the old geezers’ asteroid house and their battlecraft had brought in a tidy sum for me, even after factoring in all the labor costs involved.

“Yep, looks good. Once I’ve taken some time off, I’ll come back for another job,” I said.

“Sure. Till next time.”

And thus, with my pay in hand, I left the Mercenaries Guild behind.

With another completed job under my belt, I figured I’d wander around an anime store before finally heading home. Before I did that, though, there was something else I needed to do: send money home to my parents.

When I had been in my third year of high school, just before entrance exam season, my father had decided to escape the nine-to-five and become a farmer. That meant I didn’t get to go to college.

Well, I say that my father escaped the nine-to-five, but he had actually faced an unfair dismissal. Once I’d found that out, I really hadn’t been able to complain anymore.

On top of the fact that I had suddenly been unable to afford to apply to any colleges, my grades hadn't been especially good in the first place. And with my looks, I'd thought it would be harder for me to get a part-time job than it was for most.

In the middle of all that adversity, the reason I'd made the decision to become a mercenary was because I had already been forced into a band of mercenaries once before. One of my teachers back in my first year of high school had tricked me.

I hadn't been the only student who'd been taken advantage of either. They'd gathered up a number of delinquents, introverts, and other students who had poor marks, personality problems, or trouble at home under the pretense of sending them to a special study camp to help them avoid failing their classes. However, these students had all been sent to join a mercenary band instead.

With all that being said, in reality, the mercenaries had only taken us along to jack up their head count and squeeze some additional payment out of a client. They also had us serve as meat shields for the regular members of their band. On top of that, and to add insult to injury, our salaries had all ended up in that teacher's pocket.

A number of those students had ended up as casualties. Some of them hadn't taken the fact that they had just been tricked into becoming mercenaries seriously enough at all. The others had been intentionally used as bait or shields by the regular mercenaries.

Anyway, including me, three students survived and the other thirty-seven died. And the two students who survived apart from me both did so by truly playing heroic roles, having excelled in battle.

I hadn't looked at the situation optimistically. I had just made it through by doing whatever it took to stay alive as I maneuvered around the battlefield, doing things much the same way as I do now.

The fact that I used to play dogfight shooting games and first-person shooters might also have been one of the reasons I had managed to survive.

In the end, though that shitty teacher had ended up getting arrested on that occasion, there was a seasoned mercenary who had been part of a faction

unaffiliated with him, despite belonging to the same band of mercenaries. I remember that he had kindly given me some wise words of encouragement.

“Regardless of the results you have in battle, if you can survive, that makes you a good mercenary. You’ll be a good mercenary one day,” he’d said.

Hearing those words might have been part of why I’d ended up deciding to become one.

Another reason was simply the amount of money I could make.

When I’d been pressed into joining that band of mercenaries back in my first year of high school, immediately after that first deployment, that shitty teacher and those mercenaries had all been arrested.

I recall that because my teacher hadn’t shown any obvious signs of remorse, he had been sentenced to death without a moment’s delay.

At the time, the police had informed me that just from that single deployment, my teacher had expected to receive 120 million credits.

Divided by forty people, that meant that new recruits were worth three million credits apiece. I can remember that hearing that had blown my mind.

That per-head rate had turned out to be the going rate when a mercenary accepts a mission that is certain to involve combat.

Though I at least had made some new friends for life, the remainder of *my* time in high school had been peaceful and uneventful, devoid of anything worth writing home about.

Incidentally, my parents presently resided on my father’s birth planet, Planet Tabul. While there had been many hardships, they were still happily married and worked hard on the farm together.

Anyway, I decided to head to the nearest bank and make a transfer to my parents’ account at the ATM. The rule I had decided for myself was to send them one-third of each payment I received.

This last mission was worth four hundred thousand credits, but selling the old geezers’ ships had made me another 5.6 million credits.

Therefore I sent them a third of the total sum—meaning two million credits.

My previous mission'd had the following terms: No recovery would be offered in the case of shipwreck, but fuel and ammunition would be provided along with a payment of about three million credits. I had sent them one million on that occasion.

At first, I had considered sending them closer to half of my pay, but then I'd reasoned that it would be better for me to put some money aside in case of unforeseen circumstances.

Even with just the initial payment of four hundred thousand credits from this mission, I would be able to cover a month of living costs and have more than enough left over to buy two deluxe box sets from the anime shop. So, once I'd subtracted enough to cover fuel and maintenance costs for my ship, I put everything else into my savings account.

Once I was done sending money home, I headed to the anime shop to buy some light novels to read during transit or mission standby along with some data discs of the latest anime.

However, on my way there, I came across someone I really would've rather not have run into.

It was another one of the survivors from that time I'd been tricked and pressed into a band of mercenaries. But unlike me, he had survived by playing the part of a protagonist. His name was Riol Barnekust.

He was quite the handsome devil, kind to absolutely everyone, earnest with a strong sense of justice, had excellent grades, and was great at sports to boot. There was really nothing about him to criticize.

And, like many men of his ilk, he happened to be as stubborn as he was kind.

That was why I really couldn't stand the guy.

In order to not be seen, I tried to leave in a hurry, but in a stroke of bad luck, I was discovered.

"Hey, John Ouzos. How much longer do you plan on remaining a *mere mercenary*?"

NPC No. 7: “At any rate, I won’t be joining the army. More importantly, should you really be keeping your girlfriends waiting? I don’t want to interrupt your date.”

Since I became a mercenary, the guy had said the same thing to me every time we met—it was really starting to get on my nerves.

This freaking guy, Riol Barnekust, was the second-eldest son of a count. Though for some noble purpose, he had come from the Imperial Homeworld to my home planet, Planet Ittsu, and enrolled in an ordinary high school.

So, why had a nobleman like him been chosen by that teacher who’d acted as a go-between for the mercenaries?

This is only my guess, but I think it was because his family had treated him as if he were unwanted.

If that hadn’t been the case, an aristocrat of his stature never would have attended an ordinary school like mine in the first place. He surely never would have ended up a victim of such a tragic crime either.

After that had happened during his time at our school, he became the subject of some discussion and was recruited by the Imperial Army after graduation. That had been partially based on his performance during that fateful deployment.

Being an ace pilot with the rank of major, he was now one of the officers at the center of the army’s propaganda efforts. To put it simply, he was pretty much an upstart protagonist.

If he had any adversaries, he might be the type to say, “How do you like me now?!”

By the way, I always gave him the same canned response every time we met and he attempted to invite me to join the army.

“I already told you this, but if I join the army, I’ll just have a higher chance of dying, so count me out.”

“But being a mercenary is dangerous too, isn’t it?!” he’d counter. “If that’s your worry, the army offers all kinds of insurance and benefits. And more importantly, don’t you know you’d be working for the benefit of the empire?!”

He’d keep trying to push his opinions onto me, completely ignoring the fact I’d always have a seriously peeved expression on my face at that point.

Barnekust, man, why do you want me to join the army so badly?

As for his own reason for joining, it didn’t seem to be because mercenary work was a particularly trashy business. Rather, it seemed that if he was going to do that sort of work anyway, he would rather do it as part of the armed forces. He *seriously* appeared to feel that way—perhaps that incident in high school had simply instilled in him a prejudice against mercenaries.

But the truth remained that the employment environment within the army for people from colony planets was horrible.

As a matter of fact, until seventy years ago, my home planet was the capital of a state known as the Galactic Democracy. Seventy years ago, it had been invaded by the Empire and became one of its colonies.

That meant that I would naturally face discrimination based on my planet of origin—and that might happen in the military or in a career in politics. If I joined the military in particular, I would have to face the very real possibility of being used by nobility as cannon fodder or as an outlet to relieve their stress. If I were a beautiful woman, I might even be asked to offer up my body. Even if I were to achieve a great deal in the army, they would simply take the credit and blame me for their failures. That was a common practice. In the worst-case scenario, I might even be unfairly laden with the crime of insubordination against an officer and be put to death. These were dangers not only for people from colony worlds, but even imperial citizens who had been part of the empire for generations.

While soldier salaries were likely higher than what regular office workers might earn, they looked pretty low when taking into account the value of one’s own life and human dignity.

Given that Barnekust was a man of noble birth, he probably didn't understand such things. Moreover, he probably really thought he was being *kind* by offering me this invitation.

So, to put it bluntly, I wanted nothing to do with him. And if I ever did think of joining the army, he would definitely bother me more.

In all, the Mercenaries Guild was an extremely comfortable place to work. Even though you were personally responsible for nearly everything, that also meant you were far less constrained.

Who'd join the damn army?!

"Mercenaries, too, contribute to the empire more than enough, don't we? We keep the peace and ensure the safe transport of goods."

"That may be so, but why not do the same work for the army? It would please Her Majesty the Empress greatly."

If I had to hazard another guess as to why he still insisted on trying to recruit me, it probably had something to do with the empress.

The thirty-eighth and current ruler of the empire, Her Imperial Majesty Amilia Frannodol Orvorus, was a veritable beauty, with silver-blue hair, deep black eyes, and a fair complexion. She was the subject of much online discussion as Our Chosen Beauty and Empress.

Perhaps he and the empress were childhood friends and he wanted to invite me to join the army out of the purest of good intentions, simply wanting to help her in any way he could. And although he might not have been aware of it himself, he might've also been motivated by a desire to show his own virtues to his childhood friend.

Well, whatever his reasons might have been, it was still a nuisance.

Oh, and thanks to the fact that I had been engaged in conversation with the guy for quite a while at this point, my life was now in peril.

That was because of the women in his entourage. They were dressed in military garb, so while I couldn't tell if they were his subordinates, comrades, or higher-ups, they were definitely army personnel. Whatever rank these ladies

were, they were all glaring at me with the most fearsome expressions I could have ever imagined.

Moreover, they all wore army-issue laser guns on their waists. Things could only get worse for me from here.

Of course, they would be committing a crime if they murdered me, and thanks to the advocacy of our empress, there had been some advancements in the way the empire considered crimes committed by aristocrats, like introducing more severe punishments. However, if they were aristocrats, they were definitely still more likely to escape judgment—there was a high chance that they would successfully cover up a single murder.

From the point of view of these women, they had finally seized the opportunity for a date with Barnekust. They must've been thinking, *How dare this guy get in our way?!*

In that case, they must be pretty eager to put an end to this fruitless conversation, huh?

Hey, you all can tell I'd rather not talk to him either, right?

But of course, they couldn't possibly understand that.

That being the case, I would have to exploit their presence.

"At any rate, I won't be joining the army," I said. "More importantly, should you really be keeping your girlfriends waiting? I don't want to interrupt your date."

Once I pointed the ladies out, Barnekust seemed to finally remember that he had company.

"This isn't a date!" he said. Then, he turned to the women with an apologetic smile on his face. "Sorry for keeping you all waiting."

All he had to do was smile at them and the eyes that had been glaring at me suddenly turned to focus on him. The ladies' gazes softened in an instant.

One of the women wrapped her arms around one of Barnekust's arms. "No, not at all. We think it's lovely to see you so worried about your friend, Major!"

Then another woman grabbed a hold of his arm too. "That's right. I still have

some spare time after this, so don't worry."

This was the start of a struggle between those two women, each insisting that *she* was really Riol Barnekust's lover. They tried to tear his arms out of each other's grip.

"Hey, you two. Please, stop grabbing my arm!"

They began to quarrel quite energetically, so I thought that as long as no one was looking at me, I might as well seize the opportunity to swiftly take my leave.

"See? You are on a date. Well, I'm only in the way here, so I'll just make my retreat."

"Wait! I'm not done talking to... Argh?!"

With Barnekust still visible out of the corner of my eye but rendered unable to move by the two women grabbing at his arms, I left that place with all due haste.

I'm kinda tired... Let's go to the anime store tomorrow...

After getting back to my room, I took a quick shower and bought a bite to eat from the local convenience store. I took a moment to quickly check the official website for my favorite anime and went right to bed.



Aside: Riol Barnekust

John Ouzos was here—one of the survivors of the incident that had taken place during my first year of high school.

Why wouldn't he heed my advice?

Rather than carry on working as a mercenary, if he were to enlist in the Imperial Army and distinguish himself through service, he—someone born on a colony world—could be of at least some use to the empire. Why wouldn't he choose that path?

If he joined the army and was lucky enough to be placed in my unit, he would be able to rise to a substantial position. Adding a capable recruit to our forces

would count towards my own achievements as well!

He would even have the chance to help Amilia, who'd been working so hard...

Ah, I get it! He's been hesitating on my behalf!

I bet he's been thinking that if someone like him—someone from a colony planet—was placed next to a pure-blood noble like me, he'd only be a nuisance!

I never worry about stuff like that, though.

The next time we meet, I bet he'll only be too happy to enlist if I tell him that I'll put in a good word with the brass so he can be placed under my direct command.

With his lightning-fast judgment, I'm sure he'd make a fine adjutant!

Despite the ladies still yanking on my arms, I was convinced of my own line of reasoning.

NPC No. 8: “Well then, we are now about to commence the mission briefing! Listen up, mercenaries!”

I think bumping into those disagreeable people yesterday must've raised my stress levels.

Though I'd told myself I would just quickly check my favorite video website, after watching a number of videos, it was already 2 a.m., so I finally went to sleep after that. When I awoke, it was already midday.

“Since I missed out yesterday, today I've got to go...”

Today, I would visit Animember, the anime store I'd wanted to go to yesterday. To start off, I was going to purchase the latest volume of a series I was following along with some doujinshi. I figured I'd also widen my search at the store to pick up some anime data-cards and some new books to read.

Right, right, I'd like to try and dig up some older works too... Let's stop by Seizaban as well.

“Guess I'll eat lunch out.”

While I washed my face, I thought about what restaurant to go to for lunch. If I'd woken up a little earlier, I could have made my own, but given it was already the afternoon and I had plans to go somewhere, I decided it would be better to have a slightly later lunch after cleaning my apartment instead.

While I considered all these things, I got to work cleaning up. My objective was always to make sure that I did the minimum amount necessary to stop my room from getting messy.

The apartment building I lived in was one rented exclusively to mercenaries. They typically had a garbage chute on each floor so all one had to do was throw any trash down it. But, perhaps partly in order to allow management to confirm whether or not the tenants were still alive, such a system of chutes had not

been installed here.

Instead, there was a series of cans for different types of trash in the basement. You could dispose of your garbage anytime regardless of what day it would be collected.

Management was also flexible when it came to things like extensions on rent payments or customizing your room.

However, the contract stated that if a room's rent was unpaid for six months and the tenant couldn't be contacted, management would determine that the tenant had died. Any possessions left in that tenant's room would be sold or thrown out. But, apparently, if management was able to contact their family, they would at least need to discuss the matter with them first.

As for my ship, it was still docked in the Mercenaries Guild's hangar, so there was no problem there.

Anyway, the apartment I rented had one bedroom and a combined living-dining room with a kitchen as well as a separate toilet and bathroom. There were other properties with the same basic layout but with two or even three bedrooms—I had occasionally seen married couples and children in the first-floor entrance lobby.

There was no way any guests would ever come to my apartment, though, so I had my bed set up in the living room.

My solitary bedroom was set up as a library slash computer room with shelves stuffed with manga, novels, doujinshi, and anime data-cards. As for indecent games, I found that playing them just made me feel empty inside. The first one I had ever bought was still sitting on a shelf. As for figurines, even the idea of having them on display scared me, so I avoided buying them as a matter of principle.

So, besides my computer room, my place looked more or less like a normal apartment.

Given that a single man lived here, it was a little bit cluttered, but I had vowed to myself that I wouldn't let it get really dirty. In fact, I wasn't allowed to.

There used to be someone in this same building who had kept his place filthy

and had failed to clean up his act after many warnings. While he had been out on a mission, management had sold off everything in his room.

By the way, those penalties were all clearly written in the rental contract. You really couldn't complain if they were applied to you.

After I was done cleaning my room, I changed into some clean clothes and headed to Animember, the anime store.

Animember was located in the downtown shopping district of Palbea City, a ten-minute walk away from Palbea Station, which was in turn a ten-minute train ride from my local station on the Empress Railway line.

There were often traffic jams both on the ground and in the air thanks to all the air-cars and air-bikes here. So, while it depended on the time of day, it was usually faster to travel long distances by train and short distances on foot.

On Planet Hein, where the imperial capital was situated, there was a system managed by the city that transported people individually by capsule car. Since we didn't have anything like that here on Planet Ittsu, I had to resort to other means.

Besides, I actually rather liked walking around the city streets.

On the terrestrial roads and the skyway—the region in the air where car access was permitted—both air-cars and air-bikes zoomed past each other. All kinds of buildings—low, medium, and high-rise—sporadically dotted the cityscape.

Pedestrians, too, walked to and fro across the streets. There were holographic advertisements and popular music and store jingles could be heard blaring out of shopfronts. I saw energy stands and cafés on the roofs of buildings, walking vending machines and trash cans, and a candy store whose android staff had exposed mechanisms. I could see a high-rise apartment with a garage right next to it too. Because I spent most of my days in life-threatening environments, I really enjoyed looking around these safe, boring city streets.

Depending on the planet and the area, there were places that were more like slums that weren't so safe and secure, so I still had to watch my back.

Well, Palbea City at least had a relatively low crime rate, so I was probably safe here.

The Mashitomo Building in this shopping district, where Animember was located, was crammed with all kinds of stores selling anime merchandise, hobby goods, trading cards, and games. Seizaban happened to be in this building as well.

Perhaps partially due to it being lunchtime, there weren't too many customers inside Animember when I arrived.

Here, the staff was split fifty-fifty between androids and humans. They sometimes greeted customers in cosplay. Because the androids could easily replace any part of their bodies, they sometimes looked exactly like the characters they were cosplaying.

At the moment, the characters Chisato Nishikino and Takina Kamigishi from *Reset Recall* were especially popular.

I searched for the latest volumes of my favorite light novels, manga, and doujinshi and, after making a purchase, I headed to Seizaban. I enjoyed myself by digging up some older works there, and then I casually strolled around each floor of the Mashitomo Building before finally leaving it behind.

Once the lunchtime peak had passed and there weren't quite so many people, I had lunch at a fast-food restaurant. I decided that I'd make a stop at home first before heading to the Mercenaries Guild.

My reason for doing so was that during my meal, a special summons order had arrived. We usually just called it the red slip.

The Mercenaries Guild was able to distribute these orders to every one of its members, and as long as a member wasn't indisposed for some reason, they had to answer the summons. The only exemptions were things like being under contract for another job, incapacitation by injury or illness (or pregnancy and labor for female members), or having a battlecraft that had been lost or was undergoing prolonged maintenance.

It seemed that this summons had been issued to members of every branch of the Mercenaries guild in the Poeto Sector. Ignoring or refusing it would come

with a significant penalty.

So, I made the necessary preparations at home so I could depart at a moment's notice and headed to the Guild.

I greeted Lohnes. "'Sup."

"Hey. You're late."

"The order came while I was eating, so it really surprised me. So, why did they issue a red slip?"

Old Man Lohnes's answer was seriously unpleasant.

"If you want any more details, there's going to be a briefing by the military in thirty minutes, but it looks like they're going to tell us to head up a major mission to take out some pirates."

And so, thirty minutes later, all the mercenaries who had been summoned were told to assemble in the hall that was sometimes used for ceremonies. In the crowd, I was able to spot Mr. Cocky, Mr. Hero, and Fialka.

But that means...

"Long time no see, Captain Ouzos," somebody greeted me in a singsong voice.

"I thought you might come..." I groaned.

I had just received a call on my Wrist-Com from the light battlecraft WVS-09 (aka Rossweisse), who happened to be Mr. Cocky's own battlecraft. She was also a sentient superweapon who had been unearthed from the ruins of an ancient civilization.

I was sure I had blacklisted communications from her addressed to both my ship and my Wrist-Com, but I decided not to think about how she was still able to get through.

"Have you given any further consideration to my offer for us to become partners?" she asked.

Although the Wrist-Com I used was on the small side, it was fitted with a projector display, allowing me a clear view of Rossweisse's plain smile.

“I think I already refused your offer, correct? Besides, if you’re here, doesn’t that mean you’re still with Mr. Cocky?” I asked, clearly conveying my own intentions and pointing out her present circumstances.

Rossweisse’s reply was rather fiendish. “He cried and begged me to take him back, so we’re still together for the time being. But I am prepared to desert him at any time.”

Just as I thought—Rossweisse really couldn’t be trusted.

Because my skill level was higher than Mr. Cocky’s, she was looking to partner up with me—but that meant that if she ever found someone more capable than me, she’d dump me for them too.

While I was dealing with her, a well-built, middle-aged soldier standing behind a podium appeared on the colossal projector screen in front of us.

“Well then, we are now about to commence the mission briefing! Listen up, mercenaries!” he cried, raising his voice and addressing all of us.

Though I expected this guy to go on to explain the strategy for our mission, this expectation was betrayed.

“All right, allow me to explain the mission.”

Taking the place of that soldier, a famous officer who was part of the army’s propaganda machine, much like Riol Barnekust, stepped up to the podium on the screen. Her name was Captain Priscilla Hyliat.

She was the daughter of Lord General Lascoz Hyliat—a man so distinguished and capable that he was considered by many to be one of the top two soldiers in the entire Imperial Army—and she worked as the deputy chief of the Imperial Guard. With black hair, purple eyes, and porcelain-white skin, she was beautiful and had a great figure. Most men would probably be captivated by her. Moreover, when it came to her abilities in tactical command and maintaining the integrity of a force’s logistics, she was said to be even more capable than her father.

From the perspective of a propagandist, she was the perfect specimen.

With a serious expression on her face, Captain Hyliat explained the mission

plan. “On this occasion, your mission as mercenaries will be to secure the beachhead for our assault on the Kaides Pirate Band’s base. To annihilate the heinous and formidable Kaides Pirate Band, this operation is absolutely vital.”



“I hate that woman,” said Rossweisse, cursing the captain under her breath.

The truth was that Rossweisse was certainly not the only one who reacted to Captain Hyliat in that manner. How could I put it? Though Captain Hyliat acted like a soldier, there was something about her that made others want to protect her. She also happened to be extremely good at handling people and asking for favors.

And not only that, but this didn’t seem to be a technique she had learned, but rather something she was pretty much born with. To put it uncharitably, she was a woman who seemed to have a natural sly streak in her. However, she was most likely doing her job with the utmost earnestness, so that made her reputation all the more pitiable.

Well, it wasn’t as if she’d ever have anything to do with me, and I wasn’t really interested in her anyway.

“Furthermore, when we carry out this operation, we are going to be joined by some powerful reinforcements of our own.” Captain Hyliat looked in the direction of a man wearing a black space pilot’s suit—it looked like it must have been custom-made for him. That man now appeared on the screen.

“Those of you who are mercenaries must surely be familiar with this man. Within the organization known as the Mercenaries Guild, one that spans the entire known universe, he is one of only twelve members granted the rank of King: Albert Sirclud!”

Upon being introduced, the man in black casually raised one of his hands.

NPC No. 9: “Captain Ouzos, I have some unfortunate news for you... I’m afraid I’ve found my soulmate.”

Albert Sirclud—one of just twelve King-rank mercenaries in the entire Mercenaries Guild.

I never would have expected a celebrity like him to show up during one of my missions.

It goes without saying that he was tall and handsome, but he was also so incredibly capable that he had earned the aliases “One-Man Fleet” and “the Ebony Devil.”

According to rumors, the ship he piloted was developed as a prototype in a certain shipyard. It was monstrously powerful and couldn’t be controlled by anyone except for him.

With his participation, our mission to establish a beachhead for the army’s attack on the Kaides Pirate Band’s base had a high probability of going well. Perhaps Captain Hyliat had only proposed this operation after first obtaining his cooperation.

The explanation of the mission plan then resumed.

First, mercenaries on each planet would all assemble at their designated meeting places by the designated time. After that, once the mercenary forces had surrounded the pirate base, they would annihilate the enemy’s interception forces. Next, the military’s Imperial Guard would infiltrate the enemy base and bring it under their control.

As a mission plan, it was orthodox to the extreme—a well-tested strategy.

Artillery fire from the enemy base, as well as resistance by the interceptors, was of course all included in their calculations. So was the probability of any given mercenary becoming a casualty, naturally.

But this was fine. We mercenaries all did our jobs with that assumption in

mind.

There was just one question I had, though—it concerned just *who* had been chosen to infiltrate the enemy base and bring it under control.

Usually, the Crusaders or Planetary Defense Force from the Central Fleet would be the right unit for this kind of operation, but for some reason, the Imperial Guard had been chosen as its linchpin. However, the Imperial Guard existed for the empire's great leader, Her Imperial Majesty the Empress. It was not a unit that should be deployed for the annihilation of some pirates.

That being said, I did at least want to think that their decision to take that role in this operation was a kind of demonstration on the part of the military. If that was the case, I expected they would send their very best unit. But in the event that it was instead just an opportunity for some noble personages to engage in recreation and show off (regardless of their ability), then not only would our efforts be doubled, but if we weren't careful, they could easily be octupled. Any failures committed by them would surely be blamed on us.

We aren't even entering the base. How am I supposed to get in your way, huh?

In all honesty, I wanted no part of this mission. But given there was a celebrity in our midst, there wasn't much chance of there being any blame to shift, especially when you considered that we also had Rossweisse, Mr. Hero, and Fialka (aka Léopard) on our side.

"We have gathered such potent reinforcements like him. For the sake of our empire's peace, please help us ensure the success of this mission!" Having said that in a theatrical tone of voice, Captain Hyliat concluded her briefing.

"Now then, make sure you all assemble in the designated sector by 2000 hours, Galactic Standard Time!" the well-built soldier proclaimed.

We all then went about preparing for the operation ahead of us. After fully replenishing their ammunition and refueling, battlecraft departed from the hangar in quick succession.

I, of course, made sure I was one of the last to leave.

About one hour after I'd taken off, I arrived at the designated sector. Then,

we mercenaries proceeded to surround the Kaides Pirate Band's hideout.

The surrounding space was crammed with battlecraft of all kinds, making it look like a spaceship trade show.

Out of all of these ships, several stood out. One was Albert Sirclud's ship. It was entirely black, save for a cartoonish painting of a devil on the side of its hull. Then there was Rossweisse, who was *kindly* letting Mr. Cocky—aka Lambert Reargraz—ride inside her. Her ship's body was silver and chartreuse and was adorned with a winged helmet emblem.

With the way those two ships looked, it was impossible to imagine them belonging to anyone other than top ace pilots.

Then, just behind our group, was the fleet from the Imperial Guard. Once they arrived, they immediately issued a transmission to all ships.

A handsome fellow whose face might as well have proclaimed him king suddenly appeared on my monitor.

"Calling all officers and soldiers!" he said. "I am Kielect Erundibar, commander of the Galactic Empire's Imperial Guard! I hold the rank of general and the title of duke!"

This man was said to be a cousin of the current empress. Reportedly, someone somewhere had proposed crowning him Emperor.

"The fate of this mission, with the goal of annihilating the heinous Kaides Pirate Band, rests on all of your shoulders! Anyone who threatens the peace of our empire—no, our *world*—must be driven to destruction, must they not?!"

His Excellency the general's words got everyone worked up. Some of the men surely had some words of resentment for him, though, like "Blow that hunk to hell!"

At any rate, the mission to destroy the Kaides Pirate Band had commenced.

The pirate band's hideout was a fortress that had been converted from an enormous asteroid. In other words, it was like a way more impressive version of that asteroid house where I'd caught those old-timers a few days prior. With so many ships approaching their hideout, it was only a matter of time before beam

turrets started emerging in order to intercept us.

“Beam turrets sighted!”

The instant I heard that report, I moved my ship away from them. While I did have a barrier, I thought that I should avoid depleting it as much as possible.

The other mercenaries were also used to this, so besides the rookies, they all easily evaded the oncoming fire.

As for Albert Sirclud and Rossweisse, they managed to blow up the turrets one after another while evading fire. Just as I had expected, the Ebony Devil and the Sentient Superweapon were playing a very different game from the rest of us.

Our enemies must have been frightened out of their wits as a number of small manned battlecraft and superlight battle drones started to bustle around the fortress. It didn't look like they were about to deploy their pirate ship.

Now, time to get to work!

Just thirty minutes after the battle had begun, more than half of the enemy's vessels had been destroyed.

Rossweisse was responsible for taking out most of them. While tracing a trajectory that was almost certainly impossible for a human pilot, she shot down the enemy battlecraft that passed by her at a startling speed.

Even the exalted Ebony Devil could not match her. Even though he attempted to do much the same thing, he proceeded at about one-third of her pace. His flight trajectory was well within human parameters.

I wonder if Mr. Cocky—meaning Lambert Reargraz—can handle the ride inside Rossweisse?

There was, however, no doubt that Mr. Cocky would be seen as even more of a rising star after this mission...even though the man himself had probably already fainted.

I mean, he has to be unconscious after all that, right?!

Thanks to the aces' efforts, our own losses had been kept to a minimum.

Though that wasn't to say that there had been no casualties at all.

It was not very much longer before all of the enemy units outside the base had been shot down. Their cannons had been silenced as well.

"All right! Good work, mercenaries! Leave the rest to us!"

At that order from Lord General Kielect Erundibar, the Imperial Guard's suppression force began to infiltrate the hideout. If any pirates were to try to escape from their hideout from this point forward, we could either apprehend them or shoot them down.

Failing any such escape attempts, we could now just sit back and wait for it all to be over.

I took a plasti-carton of coffee I'd brought with me out of my glove compartment, along with a plasti-paper light novel I'd just purchased today. While I didn't mind the databooks I kept on my Versitool terminal—after all, they didn't take up space—for some reason, I preferred books on plasti-paper.

Just as I was opening my book, I received a call from Rossweisse. Even though I couldn't imagine she had anything sensible to say, I decided to answer anyway.

"Yeah? Hello?"

Rossweisse appeared on my monitor, wearing a severe expression. "Captain Ouzos, I have some unfortunate news for you... I'm afraid...I've found my soulmate."

I knew it couldn't be anything sensible.

But I had anticipated this.

"Do you mean Albert Sirclud?" I asked. "Or could you be referring to His Excellency, General Kielect Erundibar?"

While smiling from ear to ear, she spoke some words that sounded more like something a floozy might say than a ship. "That's right! I can scarcely believe that I've found *two* men more wonderful and enticing than you! My next partner will just have to be one of them! You really should have partnered up with me while you still had the chance. What a pity!" she trilled.

Wait, the same thing definitely would have happened even if I had partnered with you. I knew I was right to turn her down, dammit.

“Hey! Which one do you think I should choose?” she asked. “Albert seems like a better partner as a battlecraft pilot, whereas Kielect seems like someone I just have to protect! Ah, but...”

For the time being, I decided to leave Rossweisse to her fit of merriment and went back to reading my light novel. This conversation would only drag on once it began, so I was certain I was choosing the right course of action. All that was left for us to do here was to wait for the suppression forces to complete their operation.

Anyway, while Albert Sirclud had certainly shown himself to be an excellent pilot, it seemed like she had only chosen General Kielect Erundibar for his looks and his position.

I guess even sentient superweapons prefer handsome men...

NPC No. 10: “Permit Me to Speak Bluntly. Would You Like to Be My New Partner?”

After exclaiming, “Now then, I’m off to snag myself a new pilot!” Rossweisse ended her transmission.

The next call that came in was from Miss Léopard.

Luckily, I was using my ship’s communications channel reserved for transmissions between mercenaries or from commanders. It actually could be switched between three subchannels: the open channel for addressing all personnel, the private channel for speaking to individuals while still allowing anyone else to interrupt the call, and finally, the secret channel that allowed individual communications without interruptions.

“Looks like you managed to survive. Let me have a moment of your time,” said Léopard.

Judging from her expression, she appeared to be upset about something. I really had no memory of bothering her during the battle, but, well, she always seemed to be upset with me. I supposed this was normal enough.

“May I ask what it is you wish to discuss?” I ventured.

“I wonder if we could switch to the secret channel?” Her expression notwithstanding, I got the impression that she had something serious to discuss, so I switched the channel to secret.

“Well, what is it you wish to talk about?”

Miss Léopard had a serious expression on her face. “Say... You wouldn’t happen to know the pilot of the ship with the chartreuse winged helmet, would you?”

“Ah... You mean young Mr. Lambert?” It would be more accurate to say that it was Rossweisse who did all the piloting, but I couldn’t tell her that. I gave her Lambert’s name instead since he was the mercenary to whom the ship was

registered.

“You know him?!” Fialka raised her voice in spite of herself.

“I coincidentally happened to fly on his very first mission, so I really don’t know anything besides his name.”

That much was true. The only one I could claim to be *somewhat* familiar with was Rossweisse—I’d never even spoken to Lambert.

“You mean he’s a rookie?”

“Well, I guess he is.”

“What were his results on that first mission?”

“The truth is that he didn’t take down any ships during that mission,” I said. “You can see for yourself if you view the battle report, but Lambert drew fire from more than a dozen enemy ships, creating a wide berth for his allies.”

In actuality, Lambert had simply wet himself during the mission. That’d meant that Rossweisse had apparently been too busy operating her onboard cleaning droid to focus her attention on attacking enemy ships.

“Looking at the results from today’s battle, he’s good enough that it wouldn’t be strange for the exam requirement to be waived in his case. He could be immediately placed at Bishop rank...”

Fialka pondered everything she had learned with a serious expression.

I could understand why she was impressed. Not only was that flight trajectory beyond what any human could manage, but she had to be wondering just what kind of person had managed to produce such impressive results in battle.

Although, in fact, a *person* hadn’t been responsible.

After pondering this for a while, Fialka suddenly spoke to me again. “Say... Don’t you find it frustrating?”

“I’m not about to envy someone who would attempt such superhuman maneuvers... I’d probably die if I tried those myself...”

“Well... That may well be so...”

In all honesty, Rossweisse, an ancient weapon, was worlds apart from me.

Even Fialka seemed to understand that much.

“But he’s only a rookie and he might soon outrank you, you know! Doesn’t that frustrate you?” she asked.

“Not really. After all, I have no intention of advancing to Bishop rank myself,” I said. I was just giving my usual answer to this line of questioning from Fialka.

Predictably, this made Fialka fly into a rage. She started yelling at me. “How can you sit idly by?! Don’t you ever think about showing off your own skills to the people around you? Even a little bit?!”

Given that she herself was the very model of earnestness, a guy like me must’ve been insufferable. But I really did have my own reasons for not wanting to advance to Bishop rank.

“Doing so would only end up being a hassle for me. And I really don’t see what good would come of me showing off my abilities.”

After hearing my reply, Miss Léopard turned bright red with anger. “I’ve had enough of you!” she cried, and she promptly shut off the line.

From the perspective of a hard worker like her, I had to come across as a slacker with no intentions of moving up, but again, I had my reasons.

Fialka always seemed to be uncomfortable while talking to me, so I didn’t understand why she didn’t simply keep conversations between us to the absolute minimum necessary.

That being said, perhaps she had asked me about Lambert (Rossweisse, really) because she was considering teaming up with him on future jobs?

Well, I think Rossweisse would find Miss Léopard to be perfectly charming, so maybe they’d be fine?

But more importantly, I had to find out what happened next in my light novel...



Aside: Fialka Tielsad

After cutting off my transmission with that infuriating man, I could not help

but press my knuckles against my eyelids.

I can't believe the pilot of the ship with the chartreuse winged helmet on it turned out to still be a rookie!

I had just assumed that, whoever the pilot might've been, they had transferred from another branch. They had probably been at least a Queen rank, on the verge of moving up to King.

Despite the fact that such an incredible rookie had emerged here, that man had shown no signs of anxiety. Instead, he had seemed rather calm and collected.

Whether or not that man would end up being overtaken by one of his juniors in the Guild surely had nothing to do with me.

So...why was I so concerned about the likes of him?

"Milady, your meal is ready," Shelley called out to me. She set down a sandwich, a coffee, and a salad on the table.

I certainly had used up a lot of my stamina during combat, and I was even a little bit hungry. But for some reason, that man's inexplicable behavior still bothered me, so I really didn't feel like eating.

However, though Shelley was likely fully aware of my concerns, she still insisted that I eat.

"I think it would be better for you to partake of this meal at once. You haven't been eating as much as you usually do of late."

She had entered my service when I was still a child, and given how much time we had spent together, I could tell the difference between a suggestion and an instruction from her. If I didn't eat, I would definitely be scolded.

"Thanks. I'll have some..."

The roast beef sandwich Shelley had prepared was delicious as always. It was her specialty.

While I was eating, Shelley inquired, "Were you able to obtain any information from Mr. Ouzos?"

“Apparently, the pilot of the Chartreuse Winged Helmet is a rookie who only just joined the Guild. Ouzos coincidentally flew on his very first mission.”

“My oh my.”

“How did your investigation go?” I asked.

“Looking at footage of the ship, I was able to guess as to its overall construction and capabilities and searched for a potential manufacturer... None of the manufacturing companies I looked at had anything to match it. There was one ship that had a similar shape, however...”

Hoping to find more information about the Chartreuse Winged Helmet, Shelley and I were sharing the investigation effort. We were taking this opportunity to report on the results of our individual investigations.

“Not only the ship itself, but the pilot too appears to be a mystery,” Shelley said.

“Those battle results are unbelievable for a brand-new recruit. On top of that, Ouzos said that he escaped unscathed after drawing fire from dozens of enemy ships on his first mission.”

“This Lambert Reargraz seems to be an impressive individual.”

“But Ouzos didn’t seem bothered in the least by a junior recruit outclassing everyone,” I told her. “Even though Reargraz might overtake him in rank.”

While the fact that Ouzos had not shown even a shred of concern really got to me, I also really wanted to know *why* it wasn’t bothering him in the slightest.

If the prospect of being overtaken by his juniors really wasn’t a problem to him at all, then even supposing I *did* have the opportunity to beat him in a mock dogfight, I couldn’t imagine I’d feel any sense of achievement from doing so...

While I was racking my brains to try and explain his behavior, Shelley asked me a shocking question.

“Milady, do you really want to defeat Mr. Ouzos? Or are you just upset by the idea of other people making a fool out of him?”

“I want to defeat him, of course!” I cried, countering Shelley’s question in a forceful tone of voice.

“In that case, does it really matter what other people think of Mr. Ouzos?”

When Shelley pointed that out, I was left at a loss for words.

“Um...”

As far as I was concerned, I simply needed to attain victory over that coward. Why was I worrying about anything else? Just thinking about that question made me feel dizzy.

“Well, in a manner of speaking, you certainly seem to have found someone preferable to the other men who have offended you.”

Perhaps knowing that I had no counterargument, Shelley quickly changed the subject.



Aside: Light Battlecraft WVS-09—Rossweisse

I was so lucky.

I had just encountered two beings who were worthy of sitting in my cockpit at the same time.

One was a top-class mercenary.

The other was the commander of the Imperial Guard, and a general as well.

Regardless of which one would become my new partner, I could hardly complain! They both belonged to a different class entirely than the man currently in my cockpit—someone who was in the habit of fainting and wetting himself.

Now then... Which of them should I approach first?

Right! Let's go with the mercenary.

I was, after all, a battlecraft. My true value could only be displayed on the battlefield.

It was easy for me to discover his call number and silence his security systems—even easier than taking candy from a baby.

Then, after a few rings, a fearless-looking hunk with black hair and deep

purple eyes answered—Albert Sirclud.

Though if we were only comparing their faces, Lambert Reargraz—the fainting pants wetter currently in my cockpit—was in the same class.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. This is Rossweisse, the light battlecraft WVS-09. Am I correct in thinking that I have connected to the ship Diabolos, registered to Mr. Albert Sirclud, and that I am speaking with the ship’s captain, the mercenary Albert Sirclud himself?”

“What do you want?” Albert Sirclud looked surprised even as he glared at me in suspicion.

I immediately proceeded to state my business. “Please permit me to speak bluntly. Would you like to be my new partner?”

“What?”

“I am the light battlecraft WVS-09—Rossweisse. To put it in your terms, I am a sentient superweapon who has been unearthed from the ruins of an ancient civilization. It would appear that your present battlecraft is an imitation of my family of ships—the Wagner Valkyrie Sisters—but it is far from matching my capabilities. I am sure I managed to demonstrate that earlier.”

Upon hearing this, Albert Sirclud raised one eyebrow slightly.

“My current pilot is a piece of trash, unworthy of being compared to you and unable to utilize my capabilities to the fullest. I think that you, however, would be more than able to utilize 100 percent of my capabilities!”

“I see...” Albert Sirclud regarded me with a serious expression on his face.

Looks like I’ve snagged this one.

Now then, time to make the necessary preparations to kick Lambert Reargraz—the piece of trash—out of the ship!

“Do you understand my offer now? If so, please approach at...”

“I’ll pass.”

“Eh?”

I could scarcely believe my directional microphones.

What did he say? And why does this man look so displeased?

“I already have my own ship, the Diabolos. I want nothing to do with a floozy like you,” Albert Sirclud spat out before ending the transmission.

I was frozen in a daze for a while, but a rage soon boiled up inside me.

What was that jet-black man's deal? I'm a sentient, ancient weapon, you know? There's no chance that any ship from this era can beat me!

Between this fainting, self-important pants wetter and that other dorky guy, it looks like there are no decent men among the mercenaries!

It looked like the Lord General was the one for me after all! He would definitely be safe once inside my ship, and someone as brilliant as him was sure to appreciate my true value.

I instantly checked his personal number to find that he had set up all kinds of security protocols. But as far as I was concerned, the security systems of this era might as well not have been there.

After placating them all, I easily got through. Then, after a few repetitions of the dial tone, a pretty young man with blond hair and almond-shaped blue eyes showed himself.

“Who might you be?” he asked.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. This is Rossweisse, the light battlecraft WVS-09. Am I correct in thinking that I have connected to the Versitool belonging to Lord General Kielect Erundibar, and that you are Lord General Kielect Erundibar himself?” I posed this question to my interlocutor with a smile (or at least, the image of a smile).

Kielect Erundibar returned this with a slight smile of his own. “Hmm. Not only did you somehow obtain my personal number, which is only known to my family, friends, and a handful of confidants, but you also managed to silence the numerous security measures I prepared without having to disable them first. And to think the first person to call me in this manner turned out to be a beautiful woman. I must confess, I am surprised.”

In the end, he had finally coughed up a line that showed he was fully aware of

my superiority.

“You honor me with your words,” I said.

Still smiling, he tossed a question my way. “And? What is your business, I wonder?”

I decided to state my intentions straightforwardly. In typical negotiations, each side would always search for a weak point. I figured he would find my approach refreshing.

“Permit me to speak bluntly. Would you like to be my new partner? I am the light battlecraft WVS-09—Rossweisse. To put it in your terms, I am a sentient superweapon who was unearthed from the ruins of an ancient civilization. Even a dozen of the battlecraft and warships you currently use would fail to inflict a single scratch on me. If you would like to ensure your safety as you carry out your duty, flying me could hardly hurt, could it? At present, I am currently carrying another human for the purpose of refueling and accommodation, but rest assured—he is not fit to occupy my cockpit, and I am prepared to kick him out at a moment’s notice.”

Having listened to my presentation, Kielect Erundibar closed his eyes and appeared lost in thought, clearly having a great deal to consider.

Then, after a while, he opened his eyes. “Hmm... Indeed, there is no doubt that a battlecraft birthed from that ancient, superadvanced civilization would guarantee my safety.”

He smiled again, apparently convinced.

You see?! Those who are truly worthy of me can understand my value!

“Well then, please feel free to bring your ship alongside...”

“But I have no intention of taking your story at face value,” he said.

“Eh?”

Once again, I doubted the integrity of my directional microphones.

“First of all, I simply can’t believe your claims. You say you’re such a superweapon, but the fact that we’ve never found one after centuries of excavation means that you must be either a scammer or prankster. Secondly,

even supposing you really are one of those superweapons, you just said that you're prepared to kick out your current pilot. While you allowed him to board initially, you no longer find him suitable. That also means that if I ever fall short of your ideals, there's a chance you'll kick me out too. Moreover, you clearly have a personality of your own. The fact that you are even capable of elevating yourself over your passenger means that even if I let someone else board you in order to protect them, you might throw them out on a whim. That possibility cannot be denied."

Kielect Erundibar sighed softly, then continued. "Consequently, I have no need for you. Ah, I know—later, I'll treat myself with my pay for this mission. Now, please excuse me. We're still in the middle of the operation."

He then unceremoniously ended the transmission.

Once again, this sudden turn of events had left me frozen.

What's wrong with him?

What's wrong with him what's wrong with him what's wrong with him what's wrong with him?!?!?!?

Is he completely stupid?! Does he not understand just how superior I am?! Neither that top-class mercenary nor the lord general of the Imperial Guard seem to have eyes in their heads!!!

That's it! There's no need for me to insist that a man pilot me! Two women might make the best team anyway!

Oh! Maybe I could scoop up a beautiful little boy and raise him to be the kind of man I like!

But while I look for a suitable candidate, I guess I'll still need a human to take care of resupplying me...

Looks like I'll need to keep this one on board a little bit longer... Too bad.

I took a look at Lambert Reargraz—the fainting pants wetter. He was still unconscious. I sighed to myself, even though I shouldn't have been able to exhale.



Following the advance of the suppression unit, there were fortunately no pirates who attempted to escape, so the mission was genuinely peaceful from that moment on.

The light novel I'd bought turned out to be a good find, and Mr. Hero didn't end up picking a fight with me. Though I suppose I had quarreled with Miss Léopard...

Regardless, everyone else around me seemed to be in a laid-back mood too, with some of them even performing some simple repairs on their ships.

This was the case for everyone except one person (ship?)—Rossweisse. After failing in her attempts to pick up the perfect passenger, she started to rattle off a series of complaints only to devolve into creepy laughter instead.

Then, roughly sixty-four minutes after the imperial troops had advanced, we received the following announcement:

“We have completed our goal and have brought the pirate base entirely under our control!”

Our mission to annihilate the Kaides Pirate Band had ended successfully.

Though, of course, it wasn't like we'd be allowed to leave right away.

After we listened to the lord general's long-winded speech—mainly filled with praise for his own men—we were finally allowed to leave. While it was part of his job, being in the army and all, even the windbag general himself looked kind of fed up by the end.

Thank you for your service, I said internally.

NPC No. 11: “Welcome... Oh. It’s You.”

It was the day after we had been deployed by the military.

Perhaps it was because of the fatigue from the mission, but by the time I finally awoke, it was almost noon.

So, in order to finally carry out the plans I’d had on my recent day off that’d been cut short by the mission, I decided to head out again after giving my place a proper tidying and taking out the trash.

On my previous outing, I’d had fast food for lunch, but this time, I went to a restaurant that served meal sets. Though the name of the restaurant—“Your Belly’s Friend”—left some doubt as to the taste of the one who had named it, it did have a reputation for serving tasty food. The number one most popular item on the menu was the Fried Chicken Three Ways Combo that cost 1,070 credits and included a trio of fried chicken dishes—broiler chicken karaage, tatsuta-age, and chicken tempura. It came with rice, miso soup, pickled vegetables, and finely shredded cabbage on the side.

On this occasion, I opted for the Meat and Veggie Stir-Fry Combo for 680 credits instead.

After eating, I headed for the Black Market Shopping District, which I had planned on visiting last time.

Despite its sketchy-sounding name, it was a perfectly decent shopping district. It turned out that one chairman in charge of planning the district—five chairmen ago—had decided that a normal name was too boring. He’d thought that it would never encourage vendors to set up shop there or shoppers to crowd the streets. After granting the district this name and changing its appearance to match, people started to think of it as an attraction, and apparently, both store openings and foot traffic had more than doubled.

By now, the district had also grown in scale to the point that there were not only the restaurants and clothes stores one might expect there, but also stores

for appliances, junk and used parts, hobby goods, secondhand books, adult goods, arms and ammunition, pharmaceuticals, air-cars, battlecraft, spaceships, and even army surplus goods all crammed together on the streets.

The fact that the Black Market had grown so big was probably thanks in part to a minority of extremely enthusiastic fans—who might also be considered people suffering from teenage edgelord syndrome. Such fans could be seen walking here and there on its streets with hoods over their heads, swords slung over their backs, and bandages or eye patches over their eyes.

I made my way towards a certain store located in a particular corner of the Black Market Shopping District. It had dense vines growing all over its exterior walls, which was appropriate enough for a store here.

Inside the shop, the air was thick with the scent of trees and soil. Rows of bags that seemed to be filled with tablets sat on the counter.

Behind all that was a woman who looked to be somewhere between her late twenties and early thirties. She was reading a newspaper and had an unlit cigarette between her lips. She was from a race with a yellowish complexion. Behind her glasses, her right eye was blue and her left eye green. Her deep crimson hair, which would have reached down to her back if it were loose, was tied up so it landed closer to her neck.

As soon as she noticed me, she said, “Welcome... Oh. It’s you.” Her expression was listless, and once she had recognized me, she immediately returned her gaze to her newspaper.



“You seem as unoccupied as ever,” I said.

“That’s ’cause the grandpas and grandmas all come in to get their medications before noon.”

This person was Gonzales Pattson. Gonzales was one of the few friends I had made following my second year of high school, and he was, of course, a man.

So, if this was Gonzales, why was I looking at a lady who looked to be a few years my senior? Well, while he had been in college, Gonzales had gotten into an accident. In order to save his life, his brain alone had been fitted with cybernetics and installed in an android body. Since there hadn’t been any masculine android bodies available, his brain had been fitted with a feminine one instead.

Subsequently, his human body had been healed entirely through clone regeneration treatments. But Gonzales had claimed that he didn’t have enough money to pay for further treatments or the transplant surgery, so he had stayed exactly the way he was.

Oh, and even though the shop’s aesthetics had been chosen to fit in with the overall concept of the shopping district, it was a fully-fledged pharmacy. He was a proper pharmacist too. He filled prescriptions from the nearby hospital and ones people brought to him.

“Well. What can I do for you today?”

“I came to ask if you’ve heard any *rumors* lately. I’d like a refill of my throat lozenges too. Gimme three bags each of honey, mint, and cinnamon, and one bag of cider.”

“I can see your tastes haven’t changed a bit,” Pattson said. He started gathering the lozenges I’d requested from the ones on the counter and put them all in one bag.

After taking the items I was purchasing, I handed Pattson a sum of money—cash credits—that was very obviously greater than the cost of ten bags of throat lozenges.

“So, how about those *rumors*?”

The information I was asking about was actually the main reason I'd come to this store in the first place.

Although this shopping district—the Black Market—was a perfectly upstanding area, because it had cultivated the atmosphere of a black market, there were still some genuinely suspicious characters lurking among its visitors. In Pattson's case, he was an honest pharmacist and wasn't guilty of anything worse than dealing in information, but there were probably others who were involved in some seriously messed up stuff. I definitely wanted nothing to do with any of those people.

At any rate, right now I was interested in information—rumors, that is.

"Let me see... Are you familiar with the situation surrounding the tolls on interstellar gates?" Pattson asked.

"You mean the protests to get them to reduce the tolls for gates in the Dalika sector?"

Demonstrations had been going on for a little while at that point, and the Dalika sector was home to a lot of colony planets. The gates in question made use of holes in the fabric of space—quantum singularities—in order to travel to incredibly far-flung places. The so-called wormhole model was one of the long-distance travel methods that made galactic logistics possible.

In the past—though it went back to before I had even been born—the tolls that had been imposed on everyone besides nobility had been exorbitantly high. However, the previous emperor had only had to say one line in protest—"This is an impediment to economic development!"—and suddenly, everyone had been able to use the gates for a fair fee.

However, once the current empress had taken over, a number of people had emerged to demand that she make the tolls even cheaper.

"Yes, that's the one," said Pattson. "I don't know too much, but it sounds like their demands have been escalating steadily."

"So why hasn't it been in the news?"

"If you can believe it, their demand for the empress is 'Once the tolls are lowered, we want the empress to prostrate herself in apology, and broadcast

that apology live to the entire galaxy.’”

“What kind of stupid demand is that?”

To put it bluntly, I could only say that the people responsible were morons. Asking for that made them no different than the most pernicious problem customers.

“People are saying that some nobles who are less than sympathetic towards Our Chosen Beauty and Empress—Amilia Frannodol Orvorus—might be pulling the strings here.”

“But if it’s reached that stage, you’d expect it to make the news, no?”

“In order to prevent more sympathizers from joining the demonstrators, a group of nobles who were incensed by those demands are secretly amassing forces to battle,” Pattson told me.

“So they’re keeping it quiet so no one knows they’re building forces, huh...”

The present and thirty-eighth occupant of the Imperial Throne—Her Majesty Amilia Frannodol Orvorus—had worked tirelessly to eliminate the inequalities that existed between Imperial space and the colonies. Her prowess had earned her a reputation as a wise ruler. As a result, while she was very popular among the common folk in both Imperial space and the colonies, she had garnered even more tremendous popularity with a certain subset of young nobles.

However, because of her youth, the nobles from the old guard tended to treat her with disdain and would ignore her commands. There were even some who had thought about seizing power by making her their mistress and eventually replacing her as Emperor.

Rumor had it that the current demonstrations were all part of those nobles’ schemes. So in other words, they had been fabricated by the anti-imperial faction, and the pro-imperial faction was now working to cover them up in order to squash their rebellion.

I knew that if I got any closer to this conflict, it was sure to become a real hassle.

I should just stay out of it.

Pattson took off his nonprescription glasses and started wiping their lenses. “That’s pretty much the only *rumor* I’ve heard that’s likely to interest you.”

Back when he’d still had a living body, he had worn glasses just like me, so he apparently didn’t feel comfortable unless he continued to wear them.

If I felt like it, I could undergo procedures to correct my vision, or even replace my eyes with cybernetic ones. That would involve too much hassle, though, so I was sticking with glasses. Even if I were to book the surgery, some noble would probably just elbow their way in front of me anyway.

“I see. Well, if you hear about anything else, I’d like to know about it.”

“Sure. I’ll contact you as soon as I do,” my friend said with a smile. Even though his face was entirely different now, somehow, his smile seemed entirely unchanged from the one I remembered from our student days.

I was curious about something and couldn’t help myself. “Come to think of it, why don’t you get your old body back? You must have saved up enough money by now,” I asked.

I was sure that between being a pharmacist and an informant, he must have been earning quite a lot of money, even if it didn’t come in huge lump sums like it did for us mercenaries.

He was obliged to continue paying storage fees for his original body anyway. He ought to have been able to easily pay the costs for the transplant surgery and other necessary treatments by now.

“Surprisingly enough, I’m able to keep this body much cleaner.”

“Well, I guess you *can* just sterilize the whole thing, huh...”

People with android bodies or full-body prosthetics were able to expose their entire bodies to harsher cleaning procedures, allowing for full sterilization. Perhaps that was why most people who worked in hospitals—including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and receptionists—were either androids or had full-body prosthetics. Doing so not only meant that they would never be infected by viruses, but they could avoid bringing germs outside the hospital too.

While covering his face with the newspaper, Pattson blurted out something

outrageous. “That’s why I’ve bought my own sterilization capsule.”

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

“Huh?” I asked. “If memory serves, the smallest models go for about eight million credits, don’t they? Maintenance and cleaning fluid cost quite a lot too, right?”

If this were a hospital, there would be enough demand to justify a capsule...but that wasn’t the kind of thing you purchased for a private individual’s pharmacy.

“It’s necessary for me to get in the capsule before I prepare medications...”

“Then just take a bath! Doing that would eliminate all those expenses!”

This guy’s definitely taken a liking to his current body. He’s obviously just spending money on unnecessary things so he can use his so-called lack of funds as an excuse to put off the transplant...

Well, I could sympathize somewhat. Back in school, he had been really insecure about his appearance. He probably felt a lot happier now.

But if that was the case, I’d really prefer he’d change his name or something.

Do you really expect me to keep calling you Gonzales when you look like such a babe?!

NPC No. 12: “Hey, Kiddo. The Next One is at 2 o’clock, 20 Degrees Nose-down Trim, Distance 500.”

Having enjoyed a meaningful conversation with my friend the previous day, I headed to the Mercenaries Guild today, hoping to find some work.

It was jam-packed as always, and the line for the reception desk with the pretty young receptionist behind it was out the door, just as usual.

So, I headed for Old Man Lohnes’s desk instead where no one was waiting in line.

“Sup, dude.”

“Hey. Did you enjoy your day off?” he asked.

“It was so-so, I guess.”

A commotion at the other end of the hall started to become just barely audible. With that as background music, Old Man Lohnes and I discussed what work was available—just like we did almost every day.

“By the way, is it just my imagination, or are there a lot more jobs related to gates than usual?” I asked.

I had looked at the bulletin boards on my way here, and I had noticed they were in an abnormal state. There had been almost nothing but jobs related to gates on display.

“Yeah. Well, you know about those protests? They sparked a flood of job offers from branches of gate management all over the galaxy. The offers were broadcast to many different Guild branches.” Old Man Lohnes buried his face in his hands and sighed. “And the number one category for urgent requests is for security. And at the top of *that* list are places where the protests are going on —”

I cut Lohnes off there. “You know I won’t be going, right?” I wasted no time turning him down.

“I thought not...” Apparently, my response was not totally unanticipated.

“This is the job I’d like to accept,” I said, holding out the description for a job I’d chosen earlier, without hesitation.

“Security for maintenance workers replacing the stabilizers on dilapidated gates in the Sardal sector—the furthest place from where the protests are happening. Well, I guess you *would* pick a job like that.” With a look of resignation on his face, Old Man Lohnes commenced the registration procedure for me.

This is a bit of an aside, but as a matter of fact, those who worked in reception for the Guild were also rated according to a points system. Points could be earned whenever a mercenary accepted a job, and they’d earn points again if the job was completed successfully. The amount of points an employee had was one of the factors used to determine their prospects for a raise or promotion.

This was only what I’d heard from others, but apparently, the wily young lady at the most popular reception desk sometimes registered mercenaries for more difficult jobs than they’d asked for. She would pretend to have done so by accident, but she’d steer people that way against their will in order to earn more points for herself.

At least Old Man Lohnes could proudly declare that he would never do something like that, so I had a policy of not taking on any job offers unless he was around. And even supposing that I did, I would only deal with people who had Old Man Lohnes’s seal of approval. However, for the time being, no one met that description.

Once the application procedure was concluded, I departed from the lobby. I stole a glance at the long line of mercenaries in front of the young lady receptionist out of the corner of my eye. They were still making a racket. I made a beeline for the hangar, immediately boarded my ship, and headed straight for a gate that would allow me to teleport to the Sardal sector.

In their natural state, gates tended to maintain a circular shape, but they were still unstable and tended to waver. Their shape could be stabilized by installing a stabilizer plate. Several of those needed to be positioned around the gate’s perimeter, and each one looked a bit like a flower petal. That’s why they

were called “sunflowers.”

In the vicinity of each gate, there was bound to be a cylindrical space colony that managed it. The colony would determine the order in which ships were permitted to pass through that gate.

For this mission, the client had taken care of toll payments, so I already had a return ticket ready. In this case, the order of gate entry was first come, first served. Of course, nobles sometimes cut in line, but I encountered no such issues today and was able to travel smoothly.

By the way, the gate where I had been commissioned to provide security was not the same one I was using to get there.

The details of the job were as follows:

Task description: Guarding a wormhole while stabilizer plates are being replaced.

Task duration: 48 galactic standard hours.

Each contractor will work 1 of 3 rotating shifts of 8 consecutive hours followed by 16 hours on standby.

Work environment: The contractor may avail themselves of accommodation facilities within the managing colony (capsule hotel) free of charge. Meals are also provided free of charge.

Spaceship fuel provided free of charge.

Work conditions:

Contractor must bring their own spaceship.

Contractor will be responsible for any repair costs for damage sustained during the period of work.

In the event of an emergency, the contractor will be expected to sortie and deal with the situation, even if they are on standby at that time.

The above requirement means that the contractor is not

permitted to leave the colony while on standby.

Compensation: 240,000 credits (fixed)

To put it bluntly, not only was this an unexciting job, but the fee was in that ambiguous area where it was hard to know whether they were being generous or stingy.

On top of that, if I happened to be third in the shift rotation, I would immediately find myself without anything to do for the next sixteen hours.

Well, the payment was pretty low considering I would be constrained to the colony for forty-eight hours, and since I wouldn't be allowed to leave the managing colony while on standby, I was probably going to get bored anyway.

Of course, besides me, there were more than forty mercenaries recruited from all over who had taken the same job. If any of them happened to be from the protagonist camp, one of them might fly off the handle, saying, "You think I can be bothered with a boring job like this?!" Or maybe "This is no job for a mercenary!" Then, they'd blast off on their own to take out some pirates, and once that happened, it would only lead to more trouble. NPCs like me would be left to pick up the pieces, as usual.

Those protagonists simply needed to understand that when it came to jobs for mercenaries, each really exciting job depended on the execution of 999 boring ones behind the scenes. But even if I were to tell them that, I don't think any of them would understand.

Anyway, after the finer details of the security detail were explained, they went on to assign shifts. Fortunately, I was one of those placed in the first shift in the rotation.

However, although this was meant to be security work, no pirate was about to come and attack this gate. The only locations it was connected to were ones out in the middle of nowhere.

In the end, my assigned job was abruptly replaced by a request to help space debris collectors with their work.

As for why they needed my help, this replacement work needed to be rushed

because of how the gate itself worked.

When the gate was working normally, there would be a repulsor barrier around the stabilizer plates, but during the replacement work, it wasn't possible to maintain one. While the tiniest debris did not threaten to damage the stabilizer plates (let alone my ship or the colony), they apparently still had to be collected in the name of safety.

Because the debris was spread out over such a wide area, the colony had ordered additional collector ships, but thanks to the ongoing protests, that order had fallen through. That was why they ended up contacting the Mercenaries Guild to make a supplementary request for us to cooperate with debris collection while we were still in transit.

Of course, this was considered an optional concurrent task for mercenaries whose ships were capable of assisting with the cleanup. Fortunately, my ship, the Patchwork, was one such ship.

So, the first things I ended up doing for this job was coating my craft in a specialized polymer and attaching a container for debris collection to the bottom of my ship.

I don't think I need to explain the container, but the polymer coating would protect my ship's hull from damage in the event that space debris collided with it. Tiny pieces of debris would simply be absorbed by the coating. This would all ensure that the debris didn't collide with the stabilizer plates.

I carefully applied the coating to my ship. Of course, I didn't apply any coating to my thrusters, exterior cameras, or the immediate area around my cockpit's window.

Once I'd finished, I was finally ready to begin my mission—providing security and assistance to debris collectors.

“Hey, kiddo. The next one is at 2 o'clock, 20 degrees nose-down trim, distance 500.”

“Roger that.”

At super low velocity like I was preparing for a landing, I piloted my ship

according to the directions the old guy in the cleanup crew had given me.

In the location he had directed me to, I found a large metal fragment—probably once part of a ship’s hull—with a number of smaller shards slowly floating around it.

“Okay, I’m about to collect. I’m counting on you to catch it downstream.”

“Roger that.”

The older debris collector, who was riding in the container slung underneath my ship, engaged the burners affixed to his spacesuit—a particular style of suit debris collectors had—and then flew out of the container to approach the debris.

While he slowly gathered tiny pieces—like screws and other small fragments—in order to counteract his momentum, he approached the largest piece of what used to be a ship.

Though space debris may appear to be floating lazily in one place, it actually moves at a considerable speed. And while it might not damage my ship or the structures I mentioned earlier, it could easily pass straight through a spacesuit. That was why one had to exercise the utmost care when collecting space debris.

“I can’t get a hold of this... Do you mind if I send a few pieces your way?”

“Aye, aye, sir!” I managed to intercept a few tiny pieces of debris that came at me head-on thanks to the polymer coating on my ship’s hull.

“All right! Got it!” After he had established a firm grip on the larger hull fragment, the old-timer engaged his suit’s burners just for an instant and deftly made his way back to the container.

Three hours had passed since I started my work. It was going pretty smoothly and I was starting to get used to it. The old debris collector and I made a good team as well.

Of course, I hadn’t forgotten about my security duties. I was making full use of my prized ship’s radar, so I had that under control too.

At this rate, the rest of the two-day assignment was going to be a breeze.

At least, as long as nothing else happened...

NPC No. 13: “Could You Lend Me Your Ship?”

Once my first eight-hour shift as a security guard slash debris removal assistant had ended, I made sure the next mercenary had come to take my place before I returned to the managing colony.

Upon landing, the very first thing I did was peel off the polymer coating attached to my ship. Apparently, it would be melted down, and any materials on it that could be recycled, like those tiny pieces of debris, would be separated out.

Once I was finished removing the coating, I filled my tank up with fuel and gave the ship itself a quick check before finally taking my break.

Then, I headed to the accommodation that had been provided inside the colony, a capsule hotel facility. It wasn't as if I couldn't just sleep inside my ship, but I figured that as long as my employers were providing accommodations, I might as well use it.

These accommodation capsules were of course fitted with soundproofing, televisions, air conditioning, and communications setups. They were also capable of serving as individual escape pods, so they were often used inside colonies.

Thankfully, there were also spa facilities here. Once I had gotten my own room, left my luggage inside, and locked the door, I headed straight to the hotel spa.

As well as the normal shared bath, there were all kinds of bathing options like Jacuzzis, a sauna, and a waterfall shower, but for busier guests, there were also capsules fitted with particle mist showers. Those could freshen you up with your clothes still on.

Incidentally, the accommodation capsules themselves were also fitted with particle mist showers, but I personally hated to sleep in the same place I bathed, so I never used them.

Once I'd freshened up at the hotel spa, I headed to the dining hall looking for something to eat. I found that not only were there a lot of items on the menu, but the food didn't taste half bad.

After my meal, I moved to a space that looked like a common room. As I was staring vacantly at the TV, suddenly a loud voice rang out behind me.

"You've *got* to be kidding me! What part of this looks like a job for a mercenary?! Mercenaries are supposed to blow pirates to hell and run amok on the battlefield!!!"

"What else can we do?" another voice said. "There were no combat missions, and even if someone did put out a request to eliminate some pirates, with our rank? We couldn't even take it on."

The first one, a loud guy, was probably a newly minted mercenary—and a promising young recruit at that. His partner was a cute girl, so that meant he was definitely one of those people in the *other* camp. Even in my Guild branch on Planet Ittsu that had at least five or six hundred people, a guy like him would tend to stand out.

However, since I'd never spotted him anywhere inside my branch's building, he had probably come from a different one. I did remember seeing him during the briefing for this mission, though, so he had probably been assigned to the same shift as me.

At any rate, I didn't want to have anything to do with him, so I decided to return to my capsule ahead of schedule.

After shutting the door and closing the screen that served as a curtain, I set my alarm clock and started reading the light novel I'd brought with me. But, perhaps because I had done work I wasn't used to, I felt especially tired and didn't get too far before falling asleep.

The next morning—or rather, three hours before my next shift—I woke up. I ate my breakfast and headed back to the hangar. But while I was inspecting my ship, a voice suddenly rang out from not too far away.

"Please, I beg of you!"

Whoever this person was, they were apparently pleading with the other

mercenaries for something, but their request was refused by every one of them.

The responses I heard were invariably harsh, ranging from a simple “No way!” to a full-throated “You’ve gotta be freakin’ kiddin’ me!”

Eventually, that pleading voice made its way to me.

The one asking the other mercenaries for something turned out to be the girl I’d noticed in the common room. It looked like she had become separated from her partner, the loudmouthed rookie.

She walked over to me and cried out desperately, “Um! Excuse me!”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Could you lend me your ship?”

“Huh?”

What is this girl saying?

For this mission, it was mandatory to bring your own ship. No, forget that—I was certain that she had shown up to the first shift in a spaceship.

“Wait, lend you my ship...? You brought a ship for the first shift, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Fidick... The person who was with me said he was going to blow some pirates to hell, expecting me to finish up here. He left in our ship...”

Ah, now I see. That’s a breach of contract, no question.

There was a line about that in the job description, right? “In the event of an emergency, the contractor will be expected to sortie and deal with the situation. This requirement means that the contractor is not permitted to leave the colony while on standby.”

“You didn’t stop him?”

“He left me a note and took off while I was asleep...” An expression of grief appeared on the girl’s face as she continued to plead with me. “Please! So that I might carry out my security work, please lend me your ship!”

She proceeded to bow, but since I *also* needed my ship to do *my* work, there

was no way I could lend it to her. Incidentally, it appeared that she and her partner had decided not to accept the debris collection task either.

“Can’t help you,” I said. “Asking a mercenary to lend you his ship is already pushing it, and since we’re on the same shift, I definitely can’t. At least ask someone who has a different shift.”

The girl looked terribly disappointed, but she walked off in the hopes of finding someone belonging to another shift—perhaps she was going to the break room?

Shortly after that encounter, my next shift began.

The old-timer in the debris crew and I still made a great team, and we did great work together—little by little, the amount of debris began to visibly decrease.

Incidentally, that girl apparently ended up failing at finding a ship. She was harshly reprimanded by gate management and the managers at her branch of the Mercenaries Guild. Seeing how she had taken on this mission despite having a partner like that, she must have run into some sort of financial difficulties.

I think you’d be better off cutting him loose sooner rather than later...

Meanwhile, I was getting close to the end of my shift, but at that moment, a transmission suddenly came through on my open channel.

There had been no such communications up until that point, so I was slightly worried. Sometimes, pirates would send transmissions through the open channel, so I asked the old-timer in the debris crew to stop working for a moment.

“You’re speaking with a member of the security detail for the retrofitting works on the Sardal sector gate. Please state the name of your vessel and your reason for approaching the work area,” I said.

A middle-aged man who looked to be in middle management appeared on my monitor. “This is the container ship for the Planet Racing team Crystalweed, Seed 1. We were hoping to obtain permission to use the gate and pay the toll, but...no one told us anything about the gate being retrofitted?!”

“I’m pretty sure it was announced a while ago?” I replied.

“You see, I’ve been swamped lately... I didn’t have time to check all the details...” The middle-aged middle manager sighed heavily, his face showing clear signs of exhaustion. “We’d really like to get to Planet Dapeton as soon as possible...”

Incidentally, Planet Dapeton happened to be the destination on the other side of the gate that was currently being retrofitted.

As a basic rule, each gate went only one way, so although there was a direct route from Planet Ittsu to the Sardal sector, I would have to transfer through three different gates to get back home.

Of course, my return ticket would still be valid for that trip.

Wait a moment... The Planet Racing team Crystalweed?

If at all possible, I really wanted to avoid having anything to do with them. That was because the *other* survivor from that mercenary mission Riol Barnekust and I had been roped into all those years ago was currently a pilot on that team.

That other person’s name was Scuna Nosweil. She had indigo-colored hair, which she had worn in a ponytail back when she was a student, but after graduating, she had cut it short. Scuna was very tall, maybe even 180 centimeters, and had a killer figure. When we had been in school, she had been extremely popular with both boys and girls—a handsome beauty.

Although her height was actually considered to be a disadvantage for a pilot, she had made a clean sweep of many Grands Prix in the racing circuit. These days, she was known as the Planet Racing Prince.

Both she and Barnekust had ended up becoming overnight sensations in the aftermath of that mercenary incident. Their names had been dragged into the media and they’d been referred to as two halves of the Handsome Pair. As for me, I had returned to much the same life I’d been living before.

The only time I’d ever talked to her had been a few moments after the battle we had been deployed to during that incident had ended. After that, since we had been in different classes, we’d had no points of contact.

So, in contrast to Barnekust who I'd met enough times since then to be completely sick of him, since Nosweil was a celebrity now, she actually seemed somehow unapproachable.

Moreover, if someone like me was seen trying to talk to her—with her being a top racer popular with men and women alike—regardless of her opinion of me, her crowds of supporters would never allow it.

By the way, Planet Racing was a sport that was conducted on uninhabited planets—or at least planets with very low populations of one billion people or fewer—that were still habitable and had breathable atmospheres. The sport involved obstacles that included combat. There were time-lap races where the pilots had to complete a set number of laps around a course as well as so-called endurance races where they had to race for a set period of time. Both types were popular.

At any rate, we couldn't have the team getting near the work site. They'd be likely to either cause an accident or get caught up in one.

I decided to contact the managing colony and get them to receive the racing team.

“For now, I'll contact the managing colony. Please head there before you decide what to do next. It's too dangerous for you to get any closer to the work zone.”

When I made contact with the people at the managing colony, they were startled to hear about the arrival of this famous racing team at first, but apparently, this sort of thing happened often during routine maintenance. But while routine maintenance usually took under two hours, this retrofit was still scheduled to take more than sixteen hours.

If only a faster detour existed... I would really prefer for them to go that way.

NPC No. 14: “Would You Like to Come Work for My Team?”

I returned to work immediately after making contact with the people in charge of the managing colony, so I didn't know what kind of discussion went on between them and the Planet Racing team, but it appeared that they were going to be making a stop at the colony after all. A detour around the gate would take too much time.

It wasn't too long before my shift ended and I headed back to the colony as well.

It goes without saying that the colony was abuzz with excitement. After all, you could count on one hand the number of racing teams that were this popular, so some enthusiasm for their arrival was to be expected.

Another reason was that the pilots on the team were all either handsome men or beautiful women—Scuna Nosweil was by no means the only attractive person there. Of course, no pilot in the team was just a pretty face either. They could all also boast more than enough skill.

It was impossible for them not to be popular.

Well, I certainly had no interest in them and didn't want to associate with them either, so I decided to have an early bath and get something to eat.

I was about to return to my capsule after taking care of both of those things when I overheard someone shouting in the colony management office.

“Huh? I'm already not getting paid, so why do I have to pay for my own food and accommodations? I have to cover my ticket home too?!”

Another voice answered them. “Not only did you break the rule in your contract against leaving the colony while on standby, but you didn't even work your second shift as a security guard. That means that you abandoned your post—you ought to have expected this kind of outcome. Consider it an act of kindness on our part that we aren't fining you out of consideration for the

partner you left behind to pick up the pieces!”

It sounded like Mr. Blowhard from the common room had returned only to immediately get told off. It didn’t sound like he was showing the slightest hint of remorse, however.

“Well, Fino was still here!” he yelled. “She was at least able to cover the security shift, right?!”

Fino was presumably the name of the girl he had left in the lurch.

“Since you took your ship with you, she wasn’t able to fulfill her security duties. In the hopes of somehow still performing her duty, she attempted to borrow a ship from someone on standby, but it appears that none of them were willing to lend theirs to her.”

“Huh? Then blame the people who wouldn’t help her out! I needed my ship to relieve my stress! I even got to blow away some loser pirates, so it was worth it!”

Hey now... That’s some seriously messed up reasoning you’re spouting, Mr. Blowhard.

He continued. “Besides, there was no state of emergency, so what’s the problem?!”

“When you work in security, it’s vital that you be around, even if nothing happens!”

Though Mr. Blowhard still didn’t seem convinced, the staff member from the colony and his counterpart from the Mercenaries Guild continued to mercilessly lambast the young man. Of course, all of their criticisms were both right and plainly obvious. Mr. Blowhard was at a clear disadvantage in this argument and was receiving his just deserts.

However, the next thing he said was totally unexpected.

“Damn it! I’ll have you know I’m the son of a viscount!”

Apparently, Mr. Blowhard belonged to the imperial aristocracy. He had decided to try and use that fact as a shield against their criticism.

I wonder if that girl Fino was actually one of his servants?

The staff member from the Mercenaries Guild calmly brushed that shield aside. “Unfortunately, that won’t fly here. Don’t you remember that when you signed the contract to become a mercenary with us, you were required to sever ties with your family?”

“But I’m the son of a viscount...” Mr. Blowhard wailed resentfully, still unable to accept his punishment.

Suddenly, I heard another voice.

“I guess that’s just what nobles are like... That man has no intention of taking responsibility for his own blunders...”

The speaker was a fellow survivor of *that* incident and someone with whom I really would have preferred to avoid crossing paths if possible. She was the ace pilot of the Planet Racing team Crystalweed—Miss Scuna Nosweil.

“Long time no see, Ouzos.”

“It has been quite some time, Nosweil,” I replied.

She had short, indigo-colored hair and was tall, maybe even 180 centimeters. Although her body boasted some feminine curves, her refined facial features could also give the impression of a handsome man. Her fan club was made up of eighty percent women, and her popularity could leave any middling pop idol in the dust.

To put it plainly, she resided in a totally different universe than me. So, you can imagine my surprise at the next words that came out of her mouth.

“Do you have a minute?”

When I heard her say that, I seriously thought that this must be some kind of prank or spiteful joke.

Nosweil and I then headed to a garden outside the hotel building. Trees and grass were planted in part of this outdoor space, and there was even a fountain, giving it a relaxing feel.

There were some people here who appeared to be taking naps. A few women who worked for the hotel were here too, chatting in the garden.

Once we came to a bench in the corner of the garden, Nosweil suddenly stopped.

Without thinking, I broke the silence between us. “So, how may I be of assistance?”

“Why so polite?” Nosweil asked, answering my question with one of her own.

There was only one possible answer: *For my own safety, dammit! If I were to speak any more casually to you, one of your fans might kill me!*

“Force of habit; please don’t worry about it. Now, what can I do for you?”

She seemed slightly unsatisfied with my explanation but nonetheless proceeded to state her business.

“Your father quit his old job back when you were in your third year of high school and became a farmer. Not only did he spend his whole life savings on that, but he went into debt too, leaving him unable to pay for your college tuition or other fees. You weren’t able to go to college. And that’s why you became a mercenary, right?” she asked.

“Right. What about it?”

“Your father didn’t really quit, though, did he? One of his superiors, a nobleman, blamed him for his own mistake, right? And your father was even landed with that man’s debts. Am I wrong?”

I sighed softly.

Well, you could easily find that out by doing a little digging. But in fact, even without looking into it, it’s pretty easy to guess.

But one question remained: why had she looked into my family’s situation in the first place?

“Supposing that was the case, I think it ended up being good for my father,” I said. “Before he left that job, he always seemed exhausted. Nowadays, he’s back in his hometown and seems to be in good health.”

As a matter of fact, my father had always looked like he’d been at his wit’s end while at that job, but once he had been fired and returned to the town of his birth, his expression had completely changed. He seemed peaceful again,

like a curse had been lifted from him.

“I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t frustrating at the time. But there’s no changing the past. His debt will be paid off very soon, including the interest. The financial institution in charge of the debt is trustworthy, so there won’t be any further trouble. And most importantly, my parents seem to be enjoying life much more than they did when he was an office worker,” I explained.

“But what about you? You missed out on going to college, which left you with no choice but to risk your life as a mercenary, right?”

She was continuing to ask me some awfully penetrating, awfully provocative questions, so I decided to make a small attempt at retaliation.

“I’ve come to see mercenary work as my calling. I don’t have to worry about dealing with troublesome people, and the guild rates my achievements fairly. I wonder if you can say the same?”

“Racing is fun,” she replied. “But I hate going to receptions and parties. There’s always a mob of idiot sons of noblemen trying to talk to me.”

“So you resent anything that gets in the way of you racing?”

With an air of resignation, she smiled. “Yeah. That’s about it.”

My counterattack seemed to have had a slight impact, so while I had the advantage, I decided to press.

“So? What did you really want to talk about?” I asked.

She looked me straight in the eyes. “Would you like to come work for my team?” she asked in a firm voice.

Though I felt bewildered at first, there was no doubt as to what my answer would be.

If I accepted her invitation and joined her staff, I would get nasty looks from the rest of the team and all of her fans. I would definitely face harassment, but in the worst-case scenario, I’d be killed. In fact, she almost certainly had fans within the Mercenaries Guild, which made that scenario all the more realistic.

Perhaps she was looking for someone like me in order to be able to claim that, while the team was full of beautiful people, they did not discriminate

based on appearance. It wouldn't have been her initiative, but that of one of her team's managers. After considering that PR strategy, a manager could have told her to try and recruit someone like me.

Well, whatever the reason was, only someone very eccentric would ever think of recruiting me. I was bound to refuse.

However, I thought that I might as well at least ask why she was attempting to do so.

"Your team has many excellent people on its staff already, no? So why are you asking me to join?"

While I was capable of doing basic maintenance and inspections on my own craft and making some small modifications, there was no way I could perform the delicate upkeep needed for a vessel used in Planet Racing. Those were required to hurtle through harsh environments at breakneck speeds.

She came back with a most unexpected response.

"What we're after is the speed and accuracy with which you're able to judge a situation," she explained. "With your abilities, you should be able to make precise decisions under any circumstances, right?"

From my point of view, all I did in battle was preserve a margin of safety for myself. It wasn't as if I felt especially confident about it. Even though I didn't mind being praised for my performance, I knew that I did not belong in the same world as her.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm afraid I must decline. I'm not suited to such a vibrant field of work—not even on the sidelines," I replied.

"I see... That's a shame." She smiled somewhat wistfully at my answer. "Still, I'd like you to give it some thought."

After saying that, she headed back inside the hotel.

It's not like I've actually quarreled with her, not like I do with that jerk Barnekust, so I do feel a little bad...but I have the right to say no, don't I?

Now then! Let's get back to the capsule and get some shut-eye!

NPC No. 15: “We Have Obstacles in Planet Racing. It’s Not Like We Never Fight. Besides, I Have *Real* Experience in Battle.”

After getting some shut-eye and eating breakfast, I performed some routine maintenance on my ship and refueled. While I was cleaning the inside of it, the emergency alert started blaring.

“Alert! Alert! An unidentified fleet is approaching the colony. As they have refused to allow us to check their ships’ ID codes, we conclude that they are most likely pirates. All combat personnel are to sortie at once. Noncombat personnel, please withdraw and prepare for evacuation. I repeat...”

Huh? Why would they attack this gate in the middle of nowhere? Especially since it’s being retrofitted—there’s no way any ships worth stealing would come here!

Regardless, it was clear that cleaning my ship would have to wait until later. I launched my ship and got into formation to intercept the presumed attackers.

By the time all of the mercenaries who had accepted this job had gotten into their ships, we were finally able to confirm the identity of the opposing fleet.

There were about one hundred vessels of various sizes, each one emblazoned with a Jolly Roger emblem—a skull with two scythes crossed behind it.

I was quite sure I recognized it as the symbol of the Grimreap Pirate Band. They were famous for being especially fiendish and vindictive.

But...what were they doing here, of all places? Their territory was supposed to be well outside this sector.

While I was trying to come up with a reason, I heard someone mutter something shocking to himself via the open communications channel.

“Tch! When I ran into them, they only had two ships and they didn’t seem to be able to do anything but flee. They seemed like the puniest of pirates... Why

are there so many of them now?”

Hey now. Mr. Blowhard, what did you just say?

The Grimreap Pirate Band was so immense in its scale that—like the Kaides Pirate Band whose hideout we had recently annihilated—nothing could be done about them without the military’s involvement. The whereabouts of their main hideout were also unknown.

The Mercenaries Guild had clear rules for how to deal with them. Unless their members attacked us first or we came across them in the middle of a raid, we were supposed to leave them alone. We were to report the sighting instead in order to assist in the search for their hideout. If possible, we could attempt to follow them undetected, but that was all.

Judging from his little aside, Mr. Blowhard had not only not followed those rules, but it sounded like he had even given chase to one of their scouting parties.

“Well, they’re probably all cowards anyway,” he added. “I guess I’ll make pretty fireworks out of them and scatter their ashes around space, just like those scum from yesterday!”

Not only that, but it didn’t sound like he’d forced them to stop so he could catch them alive and sell their ships either.

This was only conjecture on my part, but it sounded more like he’d probably delivered a high-output laser blast through their ships’ engines, blowing them to kingdom come. If that had been the case—although such a response would be unavoidable under some circumstances—his decision probably hadn’t been appropriate for his situation.

By the way, if you’re wondering why he was even still here, the girl he was with had ended up spending the rest of her time at the colony on security and debris cleanup duty after begging the colony to do something about the cost of fuel, food, and accommodation. I’d heard someone say as much while I was having breakfast.

Considering all the aforesaid circumstances, I could only conclude that the Grimreap Pirate Band had come here to seek revenge against Mr. Blowhard.

Though he didn't seem to have come to this realization himself, everyone else around him had no trouble making the connection. They began to hurl abuse at him, and he immediately began insulting everyone else in return.

I felt like saying something to him too, but contacting the Guild to request reinforcements had to take priority.

"Hello? Is that you, Old Man Lohnes?"

No sooner had he responded than a smug look came over his face. "Hey, Ouzos. You'd like us to send reinforcements to the gate in the Sardal sector, right?"

"That's right, but how did you know?"

"By coincidence. One of our mercs discovered some pirates from the Grimreap Band and reported their whereabouts. I don't know which branch they were from, but they apparently witnessed some idiot attack the pirates as well."

I didn't know who had reported it or where they were from, but they had my gratitude.

"So, how does it look?" I asked.

"We've had other reports about it, and it sounds like a request has already been sent to the army, so it'll probably take an hour."

Getting exactly the answer I wanted from my vague question really spoke to the years of experience we had working together. However, the fact remained that we were at an overwhelming disadvantage.

"An hour might be tough..." I said. "Though if we're lucky, we might be able to offer the culprit himself up as tribute."

"You'd be lucky if that were enough to get them to leave."

To put it bluntly, the chance of that happening was slim. It looked like we were just going to have to hold out somehow.

To hold out for one hour until reinforcements came...

Even though I really felt like taking a shot at the culprit—that idiot—I was

unable to do so due to the pity I felt for the girl who was with him. Fino, I think her name was.

Mr. Blowhard. Don't tell me that's why you keep her around? If so, you really are the worst piece of...

With those words still on my mind, a transmission suddenly came through. Wondering who it could be, I answered it.

"It's been a long time since I flew on a mission like this," the voice said.

Unbelievably, the person who had contacted me was...

"Nosweil?!"



She was sitting in what looked like a cockpit and was even wearing an orange piloting suit that seemed custom-made.

The next words that came out of her mouth shocked me.

“I’ll be joining this battle too.”

For a moment, my vision turned white.

“No, no, no! You aren’t a mercenary, so please turn back!” I cried.

“We have obstacles in Planet Racing. It’s not like we never fight. Besides, I have *real* experience in battle.”

“Still, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I’m just a regular civilian caught up in this mess, and I’ve decided to take part in this battle of my own accord to protect myself. I don’t see a problem with that.”

I doubt she’ll listen to anything I have to say now.

Besides, her battlecraft was state-of-the-art—a Storm Zero from the Triasgita Company.

In firepower, speed, defense capabilities, and maneuverability, her ship was a level above my Patchwork. Adding her piloting skills to those advantages, the average foe would hardly be able to threaten her at all.

Although the ships used for racing were capable of attacking each other, they were supposed to have been modified so that they were unable to shoot other ships down. Was this a ship they maintained so they could fight back if the team was attacked by outside forces?

Anyway, the bigger problem was that if she were to get injured—or even worse, if she were shot down—it would undoubtedly be blamed on us mercenaries. Then, all of her fans throughout the empire—no, throughout the *universe*—would subject us to a fate worse than death!

I decided to confirm one thing with her immediately.

“Have you told your teammates?”

“If our side loses, we’ll definitely be treated as the spoils of war. With that

being the case, they accepted that it'd be better for me to contribute to our victory instead. As for why I'm the only one from the team to sortie, that's because all our ships that are equipped for combat are currently undergoing maintenance except for this one."

I seriously doubted that was actually true, but it would be hard to pursue the matter any further.

"In any case, please refrain from doing anything reckless..." I said.

That was my one earnest wish for Nosweil. And for the sake of my life too.

In the very next moment, the pirates addressed us over the open communications channel.

"We found you, you son of a bitch! How dare you kill my underlings?!"

The boss of the Grimreap Pirate Band was on my monitor. He looked to be about forty years old and had a beard that covered much of his face. He wore a dress shirt, an eyepatch, and a captain's hat—the quintessential space pirate look.

The time of space pirates who actually looked like that was a thousand years in the past, and the terrestrial pirates who inspired the look in the first place now belonged to the realm of mythology. But this man had chosen this look anyway, probably to leave a stronger impression on anyone who encountered him. It also concealed his true identity.

Incidentally, thanks to this style he had adopted, this pirate boss was known as Teach by some or Blackbeard by others.

Faced with a threat from this obviously dangerous individual, Mr. Blowhard snapped back without the slightest hint of fear.

"Hah! You talk big for such a bumbling excuse for a pirate! My subordinates and I will be more than happy to turn the lot of you into space garbage!"

Hey now. Let's not say anything we might regret later.

Understandably, other mercenaries snapped at this point and rebutted his claims very harshly.

"Screw you, rookie! Who the hell are you calling your subordinates?!"

“We’re only in this mess because you got in over your head!”

“You’ve got a lotta nerve! I should kill you right now!”

Seeing this unfold, the pirate boss laughed derisively at Mr. Blowhard. “I see. So an idiot rookie got a little too carried away, huh? If you give that idiot up, we might be willing to withdraw. How about it?”

The pirate boss had ended up offering us a deal, though they probably didn’t actually intend to withdraw.

They’d certainly want to seize all of our ships and sell them, at least. The number one Planet Racing team in the Empire, made up entirely of beautiful men and women, was here for the taking too. They could sell some of those people off and make others their mistresses. Depending on their situation, they might even still enter some of them in races, appropriating the prize money and any other profits for themselves.

And, of course, every other mercenary had to understand that as well.

However, that didn’t stop them from considering the offer.

“Sure. Take him, go right ahead!”

“Go take responsibility for your own screwup!”

“Make sure you drop that girl with you back at the colony before you go!”

A barrage of words from the other mercenaries, all more than willing to hand Mr. Blowhard over, washed over the pirates and Mr. Blowhard himself like a solar wind.

The force of the wave of fury directed at the rookie even prompted the pirate boss to adopt a look of astonishment. He gave Mr. Blowhard some heartfelt advice.

“Hey, kid... You should really reflect on your actions a little...”

However...

“Shut the hell up! You’re in no position to lecture me, you small-fry pirate scum!”

Though a tearful note had crept into Mr. Blowhard’s voice, he shot forward at

full throttle with a number of lightcraft and drones exploding in his ship's wake.

“You’ve really done it now!” cried the pirate boss. “All right, men! Show them how fearsome we really are!”

With that as the starting signal, the battle finally commenced!

NPC No. 16: “All Units, Pull Back to the Colony at Once!”

With a mix of large and smaller craft, we were facing down a fleet of one hundred warships, all of which were medium-sized or larger.

Once they released the lightcraft and unmanned drones that all larger craft were loaded with, it looked almost like a swarm of locusts you sometimes saw planetside.

But it was for that very reason that we still had a chance of claiming victory.

If they tried chasing any opponent who rushed through them—like Mr. Blowhard, for instance—their allies would only get in the way. And if they fired their cannons, they might even hit each other instead. After all, pirates just weren’t as disciplined as the military.

On top of that, they seemed predisposed to strongly value camaraderie.

Just as I was pondering how we might use these facts to our advantage, Nosweil flew ahead of me.

“You can catch up with me later!” she said.

What does she think she’s doing, flying out in front like that? Doesn’t she realize how popular she is?

Well, that’s probably just her combat style. Guess I’ll go after her so I can give her some cover.

However, she turned out not to need any.

At least, that was how it seemed to me. Her maneuvers were just that breathtaking. While she wasn’t quite on the level of Rossweisse—that was something no human could imitate—she was certainly the equal of the Ebony Devil.

Her vessel spun and pivoted as she whizzed through the enemy’s formation.

Enemy vessels exploded along the blurred line she left behind her.

Having said that, it would only be a matter of time before we were all surrounded.

I decided to put into practice the very first stratagem that had popped into my head.

I approached the very nearest enemy destroyer—a medium-class vessel—and took out one of its cannons. Then, maintaining my proximity to the destroyer, I flew around it in a loop, taking out its cannons, turrets, and thrusters one by one.

While I did this, I hoped that I would be able to draw fire from the surrounding ships and get them to hit their allies instead. And if any lighter craft or drones came after me, I could deliberately get them to follow me until they were as close to the destroyer as possible, provoke them to fire at me, and have them shoot the destroyer instead as I would dodge at the very last second.

I occasionally shot at the enemy vessels around me, provoking them to fire at me, and they only hit their allies instead.

The ships focusing their fire on my ship were surrounded by many of their allies, making it difficult for them to evade any return fire. And even if they shot their cannons at me, I only had to evade them and they would hit a nearby ship instead.

This inevitably left me with a lot less work to do. On top of that, the more aggro I drew from the surrounding pirates, the more vulnerable they were.

In other words, the ships around me ended up getting fired upon by my fellow mercenaries.

We took full advantage of the camaraderie that existed between pirates.

Though it might sound like a rather cowardly tactic, in order to save my own skin, I needed to draw as much aggro away from Nosweil as possible.

While I was doing this, Nosweil blasted through her fair share of enemies, even sinking a cruiser—a heavy vessel.

Well, that's hardly surprising. The firepower at her disposal is on another level

compared to my secondhand ship.

It would not be easy to take down a cruiser myself with my ship's offensive capabilities.

Of course, my fellow mercenaries also did what they could to use the enemy's greater numbers against them, finding just the right approaches to steadily whittle them down.

Only Mr. Blowhard had failed to learn by example. He was attacking a superheavy battleship—probably the pirate flagship—over and over again, only to be waylaid by lightcraft and drones.

Well, at least we could be grateful for the fact that those lightcraft and drones were all being diverted in his direction.

Even so, the enemy had an overwhelming advantage when it came to numbers. No one on our side had heroically met their end yet, but our fleet was slowly but surely being overwhelmed.

"This is bad," said Nosweil over comms. "I'm not sure I have enough beam ammo or fuel left."

That was probably the case for everyone on our side, but we ran the risk of being overrun if any of us tried to fall back and resupply. We were pretty much stuck.

"Nosweil, please fall back! You've contributed more than enough already."

After getting Nosweil to sink the first cruiser I had encountered, I had engaged a second in battle, but it was putting up quite a fight. I was reaching the end of my rope.

This is not looking good. If we don't help the civilians to escape at least—like the people on Nosweil's team, Crystalweed, and the people who live on the managing colony—there'll be hell to pay.

But just as I was thinking that, something happened.

An all-hands transmission came through for me and everyone else in the mercenary fleet, including Nosweil.

A handsome, strong-willed-looking guy in his mid-thirties appeared on the

monitor. “All units, pull back to the colony at once!”

We all understood that the military reinforcements we’d requested were here, and in the very next moment, we all started to retreat.

All except for Mr. Blowhard, that is.

“Don’t order me around!” he wailed.

The very moment that everyone except for Mr. Blowhard had pulled back, a shower of beam cannon fire—from the pirates’ perspective, from above them and from the left—rained down upon them.

I guess that’s what you call cross fire.

This shower of cannon fire had come from a squadron of the Galactic Imperial Army and a division of mercenaries that they had assembled. While I couldn’t tell how many they numbered, there were definitely quite a lot of them.

In the aftermath of that flash of cannon fire, a good half of the remaining ships in the pirate fleet had either exploded or sank. The attack had upset the tide of battle in an instant.

The hunk who had just issued the command to retreat came on the open channel again and immediately called for the pirates to surrender.

“This is Commodore Salamas Tornchied of the Galactic Imperial Army’s Seventh Fleet! Grimreap Pirate Band, listen up! If you are willing to surrender, stop your engines and recall all drones and light vessels! If you do not comply within the next three minutes, we will shower you with cannon fire once again!”

Although the army had probably just sent whatever fleet was nearest to assist us, Teach really was unlucky—he was facing the Seventh Fleet, of all fleets.

Although Commodore Salamas Tornchied, the commander of the Seventh Fleet, was a son of the House of Count Tornchied, he had grown up under unfortunate circumstances because his mother was a commoner. However, after joining the military at the age of fifteen, his accomplishments were so great that after just fifteen more years, he had managed to climb to the rank of commodore.

His fleet management capabilities, tactical and strategic acumen, and ability to nurture new recruits were all said to be unrivaled within the Imperial Army.

His subordinates were mostly commoners and ruffians—those whom the nobility regarded with disdain and disgust—but they boasted skills of the highest class in the Imperial Army.

Both the Kaides Pirate Band I had previously dealt with and the Grimreap Pirate Band we were facing now were said to have taken great pains to avoid clashing with the Seventh Fleet in the course of their exploits.

Simply put, if Rossweisse had been here, every one of the pilots in the Seventh would've been exactly the kind of bona fide elites she couldn't resist trying to pick up.

Three minutes had passed following the commodore's warning.

"With the Revenant bearing down on us like this, we have no recourse... We surrender, boys! Disarm your weapons! We are the Grimreap Pirate Band! Don't do anything that might disgrace our name!"

And so the Grimreap Pirate Band surrendered.

"Phew... I guess I managed to pull through again..."

I was able to see the pirates handing themselves over through my cockpit window.

If we'd put one foot wrong—no, if our formation had faltered, even for a moment—there was every possibility that we would have ended up like that.

When I realized that, I had to breathe another sigh of relief.

Putting that to one side, did I just hear the pirates refer to Commodore Torncchied as "Revenant"? Is that what they call him?

I then received a transmission from Nosweil. As she appeared on my monitor, I could see that she looked pretty worn out.

"Hey, Ouzos. Are you alive?"

Well, I probably looked about the same.

“Yeah, I’m alive. Though that’s only thanks to you, for taking down so many enemy vessels.” Forgetting my usual manners, I gave Nosweil some words of sincere praise and gratitude.

“The way I see it, I’m pretty sure I was only able to do that thanks to all the aggro you drew.”

“Even if that’s true, you’re still the one who shot them down,” I said.

In actuality, a combatant’s score in these battles was calculated based on whether or not they actually shot down their opponents. There was no question that she would be credited with taking them out.

“Well, shall we head back?” I asked. “I’m worried about my fuel.”

I actually would have preferred to continue explaining how vital her role was until she accepted the facts, but I really was more worried about running out of fuel at that point, so I decided to prioritize that.

“Ah, no kidding. We better head back while we still can!”

It sounded like she was in much the same situation, so we both prioritized returning to base and took off.

Although even if we had run out of gas, a military fleet was right here. They surely would have helped us out.

If our tanks were already empty and we were stationary, that would have been one thing, but if we failed to get back to the colony despite having the fuel to do so? That would have been pretty embarrassing.

So, making judicious use of my remaining thrust and my ship’s inertia, I succeeded in returning to the colony. When I arrived, the sense of achievement I felt was really quite enjoyable.

Ah, as for what happened to Mr. Blowhard—aka Fidick Routondan—he had somehow managed to avoid a direct hit in the cross fire that had vanquished the pirates. After his tank had run empty, he had been towed away by a ship from the Seventh Fleet.

Also, it turned out that Miss Fino Foldepp, the girl he had dragged around with him, was not even on board his ship during the battle.

Now I really wish I'd shot him in the back...

NPC No. 17: “I Am No Longer Your Servant. I Submitted a Request to Your Father, the Viscount, and Was Permitted to Leave Your Service.”

After returning to the gate-managing colony, the first thing I needed to do was resupply my fuel and ammo. I also had to quickly check each part of my ship.

If I had found that any spots on my ship had been damaged, I would then decide whether I would be able to fix them myself or if I needed to take it to a dock for repairs.

Once I finished, I needed to review the battle results in my ship’s recorder before submitting them to the guild. If I didn’t do that, I wouldn’t be able to collect my compensation, so all good mercenaries made sure to prepare their reports carefully.

Thankfully, it turned out that the Seventh Fleet was going to take over security duties for the remaining four hours of the retrofitting work, so once I’d resupplied, checked my ship, and submitted my report, I figured I’d relax.

Or at least that’s what I had thought. A command came through for us all to gather in a hall inside the colony—the Mercenaries Guild was going to give out honors to commemorate those who had contributed to our victory in the battle.

There were not only the mercenaries who had taken the security job inside. There were also staff from the managing colony, mercenaries who had come as reinforcements, members of Team Crystalweed, and even Commodore Salamas Tornchied himself, along with several of his subordinates from the Seventh Fleet.

Once we were all seated in chairs that had been arranged in the hall, a few of the staff members in charge of gate management stepped up to the podium.

First, the people in charge of gate management spoke. “We would like to sincerely thank you all for gathering here. We would like to extend our most heartfelt gratitude to everyone whose efforts helped to repel the unexpected pirate assault.”

Next, a handsome older gentleman wearing a suit and spectacles stepped forward.

“Greetings,” he began. “I am Wolbalei, the chief of the Cazzac branch of the Mercenaries Guild. Due to your special efforts on this occasion, the Mercenaries Guild in its entirety will be providing you with additional compensation. As part of this, the combatant who made the most significant contribution to our victory will be presented with a special bonus and a letter of thanks.”

No sooner had Guildmaster Wolbalei said this than Mr. Blowhard rose to his feet, brimming with confidence.

However, the next words out of Guildmaster Wolbalei’s mouth were “Miss Scuna Nosweil. Please step forward.”

Then, once Nosweil had stepped up to the podium, Wolbalei continued, “Despite not being a mercenary, you still took part in this battle and even had the top score in the entire fleet. In recognition of your achievements, we would like to present you with a special bonus and a letter of thanks. Please accept them.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Ah, I can see Nosweil’s smile is a bit awkward. Well, she probably never thought that she, an outsider, would end up getting a commendation.

Once Nosweil had accepted the bonus and letter of thanks, thunderous applause erupted throughout the hall.

However, there was one man who saw fit to take issue with the state of affairs...

“Hey, wait a minute! This doesn’t make sense, does it?! Why does *she* get to be called the ace pilot?!”

Yes, it was Mr. Blowhard.

Apparently, he was unable to accept the fact that he hadn't been recognized as our ace.

In stark contrast to Mr. Blowhard, who was getting fired up, Wolbalei remained calm and collected. "Oh, it's you... Tell me, why do you think you should be considered the ace of this operation?"

"Because I got the highest score!" Mr. Blowhard insisted.

Wolbalei opened his Versitool and read Mr. Blowhard's score aloud. "You shot down a total of eighty-nine drones and fifty-seven lightcraft."

Even within the army, shooting down eighty drones and fifty lightcraft would be enough to make you a candidate for the number one ace. He really did seem to be quite a capable pilot.

"You see?! I've got to be the ace here!" Mr. Blowhard said, looking very pleased with himself.

"But Miss Scuna Nosweil, on the other hand, achieved a score of 182 drones, 146 lightcraft, two destroyers, and four cruisers. Her counts of downed drones and lightcraft were more than double yours. On top of that, she also sank two destroyers and four cruisers. Her score was unquestionably higher."

The score Wolbalei announced for Nosweil, however, was far greater than Mr. Blowhard's.

Mr. Blowhard wasted no time in denying the reality that was before him. "You're lying!"

"I regret to inform you that this is the truth. Our recorders record nothing but actual facts."

"You're wrong! She must have pulled some kind of trick!"

"Moreover, the fact remains that you were the one who brought the pirate band here in the first place. You must understand that we intend to pursue that matter, don't you?"

When Wolbalei pointed out how he was at fault, Mr. Blowhard couldn't help but shout back defiantly.

"That wasn't my fault!"

After stowing away his Versitool, Wolbalei's gaze returned to Mr. Blowhard.

Guildmaster Wolbalei ignored Mr. Blowhard's outburst and dispassionately presented him with the facts. "One of the limited rules we maintain at the Mercenaries Guild is as follows. 'If a mercenary should encounter pirates belonging to a particularly large or ferocious organization, in order to assist in the discovery of their hideout, that mercenary is not to attack them without provocation and is expected to either follow them or report them. However, this rule will not apply in the case that the mercenary is attacked first, or if they encounter the pirates in the act of carrying out a raid.' This rule applies to the Grimreap Pirate Band, but you ignored this and attacked pirates belonging to that band. At this point, you cannot claim that you were attacked first or that you witnessed them carrying out a raid. After all, another mercenary who was tailing that scouting party in order to ascertain their hideout recorded your actions."

"Still, we annihilated them in the end, didn't we?"

"You're arguing based on the outcome. If we had lost, then the lives of all of the mercenaries here, the staff of the colony, and everyone on Team Crystalweed—people who just happened to be here—would have been forfeited, along with the gate's stabilizer plates. It would've been possible for them to take apart the constituent parts and sell them off to many different buyers. However, more importantly than that, you accepted this security job with the stipulation that you were not to leave the colony while on standby, but you nevertheless took it upon yourself to go looking for pirates. Considering all of that, you can expect to face considerable penalties."

Mr. Blowhard ground his teeth upon hearing these words from Wolbalei, but then he noticed that his partner sitting next to him—his servant—was keeping quiet.

He immediately encouraged her—ordered her, really—to defend him. "Damn it! You've got to be kidding! Hey, Fino! Say something! Object!"

His pleas were met with a cold stare and words spat like venom.

"I won't," she said. "Why should I protect you? We have nothing to do with each other."

Mr. Blowhard tried to make himself very clear. “Huh? What the hell do you mean? You’re my servant, you know!” He expected her to know her place.

Miss Fino, however, did not change her attitude. Instead, she stated the facts with barely veiled contempt:

“I am no longer your servant. I submitted a request to your father, the viscount, and was permitted to leave your service.”

“What servant would dare defy her master?!”

“Strictly speaking, you were never my master. Your father, the viscount was. When I appraised him of your conduct up until this point, the viscount gladly listened to my request.”

“Even so, you’re a mercenary too!” he yelled. “I’m about to be penalized, you know? You need to take my place, do something!”

“I am no longer a mercenary either, so I don’t believe I have any such duty? And I never violated my contract in the first place.”

“Huh? The two of us were a team! So we should both face the same penalty!”

The sight of Mr. Blowhard doing whatever he could to off-load all of the penalties he had earned on Miss Fino made the eyes of all the mercenaries around him begin to burn with rage. Particularly the women.

Just before they exploded in anger, Wolbalei stepped in.

“What you say is correct. However, your penalties are yours alone to bear,” he said.

“What?”

Everyone seemed confused by Wolbalei’s words.

Wolbalei began a long explanation. “First of all, when you breached your contract by leaving the colony, you did so by yourself, leaving her behind. Then, while you were looking for pirates, your next shift should have started. However, because she had no spaceship, she was unable to perform her security duties. Also, during your first shift, she was most definitely aboard that ship—a ship registered with her as the owner. You probably left the registration process to her, thinking the paperwork involved was a nuisance. But as a result,

this incident must be considered as the theft of a ship—its appropriation by someone other than its owner. However, because *you* committed that theft—you, who flew together with Miss Fino during your first shift—we have the right to penalize you. Because you took the ship, she was forced to beg other mercenaries to lend her one in order to perform the security duties she had agreed to. Unfortunately, none of them were willing to lend her a ship. Therefore, she went to assist the debris removal crew by herself, without compensation. Debris removal is very taxing on the nerves. It is, after all, a dangerous job, working in outer space in nothing but a space suit. The hourly wage is supposed to be ten thousand credits, twice the wage of five thousand credits paid to security guards. Remember, she did that work without compensation. Taking that fact into consideration, along with many others, the Cazzac branch of the Mercenaries Guild has elected not to enforce any penalties against Miss Fino Foldepp.”

Wolbalei turned to look at Miss Fino and smiled slightly for a moment before resuming his explanation.

“Whereas you took it upon yourself to abandon your post, steal a ship that was in someone else’s name—even though it happened to belong to your partner—and put the lives of a great many people in peril. We will make certain that you face the proper penalties for this.”

The moment Wolbalei said that, Mr. Blowhard was dragged out of the hall by guild staff.

Despite everything, Mr. Blowhard was still far more enraged by the fact that Miss Fino had left his service.

“Quit fooling around, Fino! If you leave me, what do you think you can do?!”

Miss Fino apparently had plans of her own. “I have been scouted as a mechanic for Team Crystalweed.” The expression on her face told me that she was truly overjoyed.

“What? If they were going to scout anyone, they’d talk to *me* first! I know I’d make a first-class racer! You’d only get to come along as a tagalong!” Once again, Mr. Blowhard was spouting words that were a total mystery to everyone else.

I think you know that you weren't the one who was scouted—Miss Fino was.

At that moment, Nosweil stepped in front of Mr. Blowhard. “Sorry, but those of us in Crystalweed have no need of someone as arrogant and incapable of teamwork as you,” she said firmly.

Of course, Mr. Blowhard was *still* unconvinced and saw fit to bring up his father’s peerage again.

“Screw you! I’m the son of a viscount—”

“Oh, right,” said Fino, suddenly remembering something. “Your father said, ‘That boy is no longer any son of mine, so please ignore him if he mentions the name of our esteemed house.’ He even gave me a signed statement to that effect.”

It looked like Mr. Blowhard’s gambit was no longer going to work.

“No way... You’re lying... You’re lying!!!”

As the guild staff dragged Mr. Blowhard out of the hall, his face was a picture of despair—probably his first time feeling that emotion.

“We apologize deeply for the disturbance. Now then, I believe you are all aware of this, but there are approximately four hours remaining until the retrofitting work is completed. During this time, security duties—as well as any remaining debris removal—will be dealt with by the army’s Seventh Fleet. For the remainder of your contracted time here, please get some rest,” said Wolbalei with a smile on his face, thus wrapping up proceedings.

A lot had happened, but our jobs as guards for the gate were very nearly over.

NPC No. 18: “How Could He Not Be Transfixed By That Sexy Body of Yours, So Needlessly Huge in So Many Places? What Kind of Man Is He, That...Nerdy Mercenary?! Wait, Maybe He’s Just a Wimp?”

As soon as the tumultuous commendation ceremony had ended, I felt my fatigue hit me all at once. I headed back to the capsule hotel, hoping to at least take a two-hour nap.

Incidentally, the actions and decisions that’d been taken by Miss Fino during the ceremony had been met with enthusiastic praise from everyone assembled in the hall.

According to what another mercenary from Mr. Blowhard’s guild branch had told me, although he was indeed skilled for a new recruit, he was already well-known for being the kind of selfish jerk you’d expect to come from those stupid aristocrats.

Considering all that, given that he wasn’t in the habit of treating even unrelated people as his own servants, I did have to admit that Mr. Hero was a *little* better than him. Though I could probably still argue that he was just as much of a nuisance—he just directed his troublemaking in a different direction.

On my way back to my quarters, I passed through the common room and happened to hear that very man’s familiar voice.

“You were fantastic, Miss Nosweil! You really are a fantastic woman!”

Mr. Hero, having met Nosweil in the common room, had clasped his hands around hers, evidently feeling quite moved. It seemed that he had been part of the reinforcements sent to aid us in battle.

“Th-Thank you...”

For her part, Nosweil seemed to be quite hesitant to talk to him.

Come to think of it, wouldn't Mr. Hero and Nosweil be perfect candidates for Rossweisse to try and tempt into a partnership? They're both attractive and highly skilled.

Regardless, I knew I'd only end up being pestered if either of them saw me, so I decided to walk through the common room as briskly as I could.

After arriving safely at the capsule hotel, I took a bath and then returned to my room with the intention of taking a nap. But just as I was settling in, someone suddenly came to my door.

"Do you have a minute?"

The visitor happened to be Nosweil.

And, just like the last time we had met, we headed to the garden outside the hotel building.

"So, how may I be of service?" I asked.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "After all, you did a lot to support me on the battlefield, right? May I ask why?"

The answer to that question was obvious.

"If you were injured—or worse yet, shot down—your misfortune would be blamed on all mercenaries. But I'd get the brunt of it since we know each other."

More than anything else, I had done it for my own sake. While putting it that way may have made me sound quite inconsiderate towards her, it was preferable to being evasive and giving her the wrong idea.

Nosweil, too, seemed to understand her own influence and the kind of articles the mass media would write about her. "Ha ha ha... I feel bad, somehow."

"Don't worry, I'm used to it."

"Come to think of it... Is it really all right for me to receive that special bonus and the letter of thanks from the Mercenaries Guild?" she inquired, seeming troubled.

Not even an hour had passed since she had stepped up to the podium with that seriously perplexed expression on her face.

She obviously realized that it was very much the exception for someone who wasn't part of the organization to receive those honors and that it wouldn't be unusual for mercenaries to resent her for it, feeling like she had robbed them of the opportunity to prove their own worth.

"They probably received instructions to do so from the nobles who sponsor your team, Crystalweed. 'A pro Planet Racer who just happened to get caught up in a real battle shot down more ferocious space pirates than pro mercenaries did.' That would be some great marketing. And besides, the Mercenaries Guild might have seen an opportunity to show how generous they are, encouraging more people to sign up for them too," I said. "And, well, the army or someone else behind the scenes might have had other motives, but I've no idea what those could be."

Though this was all strictly within the realm of speculation, I assumed that the Mercenaries Guild had presented her with those awards for reasons like those.

Moreover, she was both gorgeous and a celebrity. It was impossible to know if the reason no one had complained about her awards so far besides Mr. Blowhard was a sheer coincidence or exactly what they had counted on.

In any case, our story ended there.

But just as I was thinking that, I heard her speak to me again.

"Say, Ouzos. I don't suppose you'd... You still won't be joining our team, right?"

She nearly repeated her invitation for me to join her team, but knowing all too well how I felt about the offer, she immediately withdrew it.

That was what set her apart from Riol Barnekust.

"Right," I replied. "I regret to inform you that I simply can't. Though we aren't all as bad as that troublemaker you saw, mercenaries are all selfish and self-centered. The Mercenaries Guild is just right for me."

Hearing me reject her once again, she looked a little disappointed at first, but

soon changed her expression.

“Well, I hope you can at least come and see one of my races, then. The Grand Champion Race, if possible.”

“Isn’t that the biggest race of all? I bet it’ll be tough to get tickets.”

In fact, I knew that those tickets were *beyond* rare. I wondered if preorders had already ended.

At that moment, Nosweil received a message on her Versitool.

“I’m so sorry. I forgot that my team is having a meeting to discuss our strategy for the next race.” She hurriedly put her Versitool away again. “If you manage to get a ticket, then I’ll see you on the racecourse! Bye!”

“Well, if I can get one, I’ll see you then.” After spouting my usual pleasantries, I started to make my own way back.

Well, I don’t suppose we’ll have many more opportunities to meet. She lives in a world above the clouds—no, she’s on the other side of the galaxy.

Following that conversation with Nosweil, I wasn’t yet back at the capsule hotel when I suddenly heard a voice cry out in anger.

“Hey, asshole!”

Mr. Hero—real name Yuri—had come to pick a fight with me.

That being the case, there was something I had to tell him.

“I was actually here first, you know? I’m working here.”

It’s not as if I followed you here to harass you, see? On the contrary, you came here after me. There’s no way you can complain about me being here.

However, it seemed that Yuri had confronted me for a different reason.

“Where did you get the nerve to speak with Miss Nosweil?!”

Ah, so that’s his angle. An overly enthusiastic fan—a real fanatic.

But if you were watching me talk to Nosweil just now, you would know! We didn’t discuss anything even remotely risqué.

She had simply come to me in order to thank me for my assistance in battle.

“She saved my neck on the battlefield,” I explained. “We bumped into each other later on, so I just wanted to thank her.”

Although in fact, she was actually the one who sought me out to thank me for helping her...

Of course, there was no way that Yuri—the fanatic that he was—would ever believe that, so I made sure to change my story in order that he might believe it.

“Even so, the likes of you shouldn’t dare talk to her!”

“But, I mean, how else am I supposed to thank her?”

“You could just tell her manager instead!” he yelled back.

“But, well, the manager seems to still be on their ship, not down here...”

This was naive of me. Apparently, the content of our discussion was irrelevant. The mere fact that I had spoken to her was enough to condemn me in his eyes.

I could understand this attitude if she had been the daughter of a noble family, but given that she wasn’t, I should at least have been allowed to speak to her.

I guess true fanatics won’t listen to reason...

“Anyway, just stay away from her!” he cried. “Don’t talk to her! Don’t even look at her! Or let her speak to you! Got it?!”

Come on, those last two rules are impossible to follow!

I thought he might’ve tried to hit me again, but this time he didn’t. He was probably worried about running out of time to go and look for Nosweil instead.

Despite that, I wasn’t so unlucky as to have something else happen to disturb my nap once I had gotten back. Soon after I woke up, the term of my contract had elapsed, and I was able to start making my way home.

☆☆☆

Aside: Scuna Nosweil

That’s twice he’s turned me down now...

If only we had someone with his decision-making skills and his eye for the battlefield... I just know he'd do an amazing job—not just in races, but in everything else we plan to do.

Considering his personality and his position, I could understand why he'd be hesitant to get too close to me given my recent success.

I do have abnormally enthusiastic fans, like the one I'd just run into, and if he were to get much closer to me—someone who was always followed around by the media—he was sure to get bothered far more often.

Even though John and I were both survivors of the same regrettable incident, no one in the media ever made a fuss over him.

Though I hated to say it, the reason for that was the difference in our appearances. As far as the media was concerned, a statuesque, fairly attractive high school girl like me—Scuna Nosweil—and a handsome nobleman with a sob story like Riol Barnekust—looked far better on-screen. We were sure to prop up their sales figures and ratings in a way he couldn't.

But given that he hated to stand out, I'm sure John himself wouldn't have had it any other way.

With all that on my mind, I returned to our mother ship, Seed 1.

"Welcome back! How did it go?" asked Aero, a fellow Planet Racer.

"He said no, just like I thought he would."

"I see... We really could have used someone with his keen eye," she said despondently.

"It's because he has a keen eye that he turned us down."

Actually, it was only because several of our members—including Aero—had been so impressed with John Ouzos's exploits that we had decided to scout him in the first place.

In a past operation where our home base had been presented as bait to conceal our true plans from the mercenaries, John Ouzos had proved himself to be the most effective combatant there save for two others—one ship with a silver and chartreuse winged helmet as its emblem, and another one that was

jet black.

But either way, he had no problem shooting down a bunch of battlecraft that I had been controlling remotely. My teammates, too, were impressed by his keen eye and his deft control of his ship.

“Is it an all-seeing eye that he has, or just a knack for tactics? If only we had him on our team, our races and other operations would be so much easier,” Aero muttered, sounding disappointed. But then, with a look of discontent in her eyes, she asked something unthinkable. “Say, Scuna. Did you try using your feminine charms on him at all?!”

“O-Of course I wouldn’t do anything like that!” I stammered out. “Besides, he doesn’t seem interested in me.”

It wasn’t like I wasn’t confident in my own face or my figure. Having attended so many races and parties, I had experienced my fair share of leering gazes.

However, I had never noticed that kind of look creeping into John’s eyes. If I had to describe the way he looked at me, it was more like someone appreciating a painting or some other work of fine art.

“How could he not be transfixed by that sexy body of yours, so needlessly huge in so many places? What kind of man is he, that...nerdy mercenary?! Wait, maybe he’s just a wimp?” Aero suggested. With a look of contemplation on her face, she started to move her hands in a way reminiscent of massaging someone’s chest.

“Don’t call my body sexy!” I yelled.



Although Aero was a bright and lovable girl for the most part, when it came to these matters she could be extremely vulgar.

“Well, if you come on too strong, nothing good will come of it anyway. Ah, but if you do feel like trying to convince him in earnest—coming on to him, I mean—I’d be happy to help you pick out underwear and coordinate your outfit!”

“I’m not doing that!”

He’s shown no interest in me, so it would be meaningless to try.

Though it is a little frustrating...

With my face buried in my hands, I headed to the meeting room with Aero.

NPC No. 19: “This Has to Be a False Accusation on Count Rosello’s Part! I Will Bring the Hammer of Justice Down on the Count’s Head for Trying to Steal a National Treasure from a Frail Woman!”

After I got home from my gate security job, the first thing I did was tidy up my apartment and myself. I cleaned up, did my laundry, and put out the trash. I took care of various other chores too, like refilling the consumable products used in my room’s ventilation system.

With that all finished, it was now time to browse the Internet.

Though it would be impossible with a Versitool, Wrist-Com, tablet, or laptop computer, a stationary setup like the one I had here allowed me to use a special helmet that would cut off my other senses as I dived into cyberspace. However, I elected to use a normal monitor anyway. If I wanted to use a sensory deprivation helmet, there were a lot of high-quality models on the market, but since they would prevent me from seeing my surroundings, I never used them.

Anyway, my setup in no way prevented me from enjoying myself. I had a lot of fun watching videos and chatting with people who shared my hobbies.

The following day, I went to Animember to buy the latest volumes of the series I was following before making a circuit of the secondhand book stores. My time off was truly satisfying.

Then, three days after I had come home from my job guarding the gates, I went to the Mercenaries Guild to find another job only to find that it was surprisingly hectic there today.

Once I spied Old Man Lohnes, I made a beeline for his desk.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“A quarrel between self-interested nobles.”

“Ah... For what reason?”

Old Man Lohnes proceeded to fill me in on the details, his explanation interspersed with sighs. These were the salient points:

The dispute was between the houses of Rosello and Glient.

The cause of their quarrel was an oil painting by an artist who had recently been named a living national treasure.

That artist passed away last month.

House Rosello held the title of Count, and the present count was a plump older man.

House Glient held the title of Baron, and their present head was a beautiful baroness who was the late baron's dowager.

Both sides claimed that they had hosted the artist back during his youth, and that he had gifted the painting to their house as a token of his appreciation. Both also claimed they had a written statement to that effect.

The painting itself was currently in the possession of House Glient.

House Rosello had alleged that the painting had been stolen.

“Appearance-wise, it seems to me like Count Rosello is at a disadvantage.”

“It'll obviously look like he's abusing his authority to take the painting from the baroness.”

Mr. Hero would clearly take the baroness's side without hesitation.

Incidentally, whenever a dispute like this arose, the Mercenaries Guild would accept requests from either party. It would be up to each mercenary whether or not to get involved—and if they did choose to get involved, which side to take.

This system allowed the Mercenaries Guild to remain neutral in all such circumstances and avoid garnering the resentment of either party in the dispute.

Their stance was tantamount to saying, “The guild has advertised your

request. If you're going to bear a grudge against anyone, bear it against the mercenaries who didn't pick your side or the ones who ignored both requests."

On top of that, it was common sense within the guild that there were to be no hard feelings between mercenaries who were contracted to fight each other, even if it resulted in death.

So, in these cases, it was typical for mercenaries who were friendly with each other to join the same side. Incidentally, the Mercenaries Guild had the following regulation: "A mercenary registered with the Mercenaries Guild is required to accept, at minimum, four mission requests that are guaranteed to involve combat (armed conflicts between military powers, neutralizing pirates, etc.) per year. Missions where combat arises unexpectedly will also be counted towards this total. However, missions that should be guaranteed to involve combat (armed conflicts between military powers, neutralizing pirates, etc.) but unexpectedly do not lead to the mercenary's participation in battle will not count towards this total."

Based solely on that regulation, I was no longer obliged to accept any more combat missions this year, but since several large pirate bands had been wiped out in quick succession, pirate activity had decreased sharply. That meant the number of requests to eliminate pirates or provide security had also dropped.

What offers did remain for security work were all yearlong contracts. There weren't any temporary (one week or less) or short-term (one month) offers available right now.

I could hardly afford to go without work entirely until pirate activity ramped up again, so given an opportunity to work, I was going to take it.

Besides, considering the current state of affairs in the empire, it wasn't like quarrels between self-interested nobles were about to run out anytime soon.

That being said, I still had too little information to decide which side to support. I thought to myself that as long as there was still plenty of time until the deadline to make my decision, I would hold off on submitting my response.

But then, I heard a loud voice from across the lobby. It belonged to a woman with chartreuse hair and fair skin. Her attire looked like an army uniform.

“This has to be a false accusation on Count Rosello’s part!” she cried. “I will bring the hammer of justice down on the count’s head for trying to steal a national treasure from a frail woman!”

Judging by her assertion, she had obviously already decided that Count Rosello was the villain in this conflict.

Well, I wasn’t too surprised—Old Man Lohnes and I had both considered this possibility.

Looking at the basic facts, I can certainly see how she’d come to that conclusion, but you need to gather more information to be sure...which I’m guessing she hasn’t done.

Also, her whole vibe reminded me of nothing less than a female version of Mr. Hero.

Old Man Lohnes was more than happy to answer any questions I had about her, however.

“She’s Fadiluna Puliliera, a merc who just made Bishop rank. Remember that guy who slugged you a while back? She’s his older sister.”

“Ugh!”

Seriously? What a nightmare! And the idea of someone who can’t even do basic research about their clients getting to Bishop rank really freaks me out.

I decided that I was definitely not going to have anything to do with her.

Ah, by the way, it turned out that Mr. Hero’s name was actually Yuri Puliliera.

“There’s still some time left until the application deadline for this mission, right?” I asked Lohnes.

“Yeah. You’ve still got five days.”

“Well, I guess I’ll do my own thorough investigation in the meantime.”

When it came to combat missions, you usually had to hurry to prepare as there would be mere seconds on the countdown clock before the battle started. But for these kinds of disputes between nobles, the situation more strongly resembled a duel. The date and time would be decided beforehand,

and only once both sides had amassed their forces would battle formally commence. They might as well say “May the best man win!”

Basically, I could afford to take my time with this mission.

My previous mission of this sort, taking part in the battle between Count Baccahoa and Baron Jeemas, had also been like that.

I still couldn’t afford to let my guard down, though. While some people would use the intervening days to make battle preparations, others would resort to readying dirty tricks.

After leaving the Mercenaries Guild, I headed straight for the Black Market Shopping District. I went there in order to obtain some information that would help me decide whether or not to accept the job offer to get involved in the dispute.

That aside, the atmosphere in the district really was just as flagrantly suspicious as usual.

Outside of what looked like a butcher’s shop, there was an interesting slogan written on a sign.

“By slowly simmering oily sludge, we produce the bitterest, darkest gold.”

What the heck does that mean?!

While looking around at the many other highly suspicious signs on the street, I eventually arrived at my destination: Pattson’s Dispensing Pharmacy.

Just like usual, the scent of wood, earth, and grass hung heavy inside the store, and bags of lozenges were arranged in rows on the counter.

“Welcome... Oh. It’s you.”

And just like the last time I had met him, Pattson had an unlit cigarette in his mouth and was reading a newspaper before he turned to look at me with a listless expression.

“Hey... You gave me exactly the same greeting last time, didn’t you?”

“Shaddup. Well, what brings you here today? *Rumors* again?”

Given the short span of time that had elapsed since my last visit, he must have guessed that I wasn't there for lozenges.

"Yeah. Have you heard anyone mention how they feel about Count Rosello or Baroness Glient?"

When I asked that, Gonzales pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Give me two hours," he said. "You can go take a walk down the street if you want."

It seemed like the information I wanted was relatively easy to come by. When I wanted to know something more difficult to find out, his investigations could take upwards of one day.

"I'll just sit here and read a light novel or something." I sat down in a chair meant for waiting customers and took out some reading material.

"Sure. Let me know if any customers turn up," Gonzales said simply. He then gathered up his hair, which had been tied up just above his shoulders, and brought it forward to expose the back of his neck. He opened up a connector positioned there and inserted a cord that was connected to his PC. After resuming his previous position of repose in his chair, he suddenly ceased all motion.

I guessed that he had just dived into cyberspace to begin his search.

From the moment he began that process, two hours passed and no customers had entered the store.

What he learned as a result of that search consisted of the following:

Despite his less-than-attractive appearance, the citizens of Count Rosello's territory admired him as a wise ruler.

The taxes he imposed were fair, and he had a gentle disposition. He also performed his duties in earnest.

His portliness was apparently the result of a natural tendency to put on weight and his love of sweets.

He was apparently not very popular with women and remained a bachelor.

After having received Baroness Glient's declaration of war, he had reluctantly begun making his own preparations.

Baroness Glient was known for her beauty and fine figure, but her real age was unknown.

She had an eye for luxury and had raised taxes in order to be able to purchase items from her favorite brands. As a result, the citizens of her territory did not view her favorably.

Because of her poor reputation, many of her territory's citizens had started to emigrate to other planets.

Prior to marrying the baron, she had been widowed by three previous husbands.

The baron had died due to illness within the year following their marriage.

Rosello's and Glient's private armies were equally matched in terms of strength.

Well, surely that's enough to count Baroness Glient out!

Of course, there was still a possibility that Count Rosello had spread this information himself and it was false.

"Say... It seems like you gathered all that information pretty easily, but how trustworthy is it?" I asked.

"Though there aren't many of them, writings from Count Rosello's own citizens seem to back up the reports about him. I got the feeling that it's so peaceful there that they don't see the need to write anything. Watching the streets of his world through the security cameras, it looks like the very picture of peace... Ngh...?!" As Gonzales was answering my question, he suddenly yanked the cord out of the nape of his neck. He groaned—it sounded strangely sensuous. "But when I looked up Baroness Glient, I found nothing but a hailstorm of libel and abuse. I couldn't see many people on the streets there, and anyone who was walking around there seemed to have quite a gloomy expression."



Gonzales pushed his hair back over his shoulders and, after tying it up again, put away the cyberspace cord. He then took a plastic bottle containing a carbonated beverage out of a small fridge underneath the shelves behind him.

Gonzales's entire body is mechanical—why would he need to eat or drink?

The reason for it had something to do with his human instincts. In order to keep his mechanical body in motion, he only needed to recharge his batteries from an external energy source.

Even considering his human brain, a once-a-month injection of a special nutrient fluid would be sufficient. However, living without food or drink still generated considerable stress. For that reason, full-body prosthetics were invariably fitted with systems for digesting food and converting it into nutrient fluid for the living brain.

Of course, it was still possible to inject the brain with that specialized fluid externally. But as for the prosthetic body, it simply wouldn't be able to move without the use of batteries, so caution was necessary.

Incidentally, both biomechanical and cloned bodies could be maintained with food and drink alone.

While drinking his carbonated beverage, Gonzales let out a sigh. "This is my personal opinion, but I really wouldn't want to live inside Baroness Glient's territory."

After hearing all this and considering it from various angles, I eventually decided to accept Count Rosello's request. Working for Baroness Glient was bound to be a nightmare.

NPC No. 20: “You’re Quite the Opportunist. Coward.”

It was the morning of the day after Gonzales provided me with some new information about the conflict.

When I arrived at the Mercenaries Guild, Mr. Hero’s big sister was still engaged in her impassioned support of Baroness Glient. Next to her was Mr. Hero himself.

There were also some people listening to her speech with idle expressions and those who regarded her with icy glares. Additionally, there were those who were apparently unconcerned and carried on chatting and laughing with their friends.

With that commotion still visible out of the corner of my eye, I went to Old Man Lohnes.

“Hey, did something happen?” I asked. “Well, I guess I have some idea what it’s all about.”

“It’s exactly what you think. There are some who feel like those two led them astray, some who already resented the brother, some who never liked the sister either, and others who actually looked into the two nobles themselves.”

Looks like I was right. Though they might not realize it themselves, that brother-sister duo are sure to earn resentment wherever they go.

“How do the numbers look on each side?”

“Though the overall count is still low, six out of ten mercs have taken the count’s side and the other four have taken the baroness’s side. The former camp also has both people originally from the count’s territory and some who fled the baroness’s.”

“I guess neither of those groups would side with the baroness...”

It appeared that the count had a slight advantage right now. But with a couple

of days left until the agreed-upon date, it was still too early to say how things would turn out

Although I had already decided to side with the count, if the baroness ended up with a much larger army, I would be the one in danger.

While I considered what the best course of action would be, Old Man Lohnes spoke up again.

“What are you gonna do?”

“I need the money, so I’m thinking of taking the request on. As of right now, I intend to side with the count, but it ultimately depends on what the numbers end up being. If it looks like the count is screwed, I just won’t accept the job.”

Both Old Man Lohnes and I had started our conversation with some small talk, but then Lohnes made a comment.

“You’re quite the opportunist. Coward.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to survive.”

At that point, our conversation suddenly ground to a halt.

It was usually difficult to interpret “opportunist” or “coward” as anything positive. However, I didn’t get the impression that Old Man Lohnes meant them to be derogatory, so I didn’t take them that way either.

In the direction Old Man Lohnes and I were both looking in now, we could see the Puliliera siblings passionately disparaging Count Rosello with one piece of slander after another. To be honest, I was actually kind of impressed that they had managed to keep it up for so long.

After that, I headed to the guild’s hangar and commenced checking on my ship. It had just come back from the maintenance crew.

Since I had asked professionals to perform maintenance on my ship, it was supposed to be in perfect working order. However, there were some workers who tried to send ships straight back without doing any work, hoping to snatch people’s money in exchange for nothing, so it was essential for me to check over everything myself.

I was sure to do this even when using crews I felt I could trust—people whom

I'd asked to work on my ship many times before. After all, you never know what might happen.

Besides, I needed to check my own cargo and resupply my ship with fuel and ammo anyway.

While I was busying myself with that, I suddenly heard someone speak.

"I don't suppose you'd have a moment to spare?"

Miss Léopard—aka Fialka Tielsad—approached me in her usual sullen manner. She was accompanied by her maid, a fully mechanized android with feminine features.

I didn't want to talk to her and would have ignored her if possible, but given that she had arrived while I was checking my ship's exterior, there was no escaping this interaction.

"Can I help you in some way?"

"I want to ask you something. Which side are you taking?"

I wasn't sure why I'd bothered to ask what she wanted. Given the present situation, it had been obvious.

I decided to try to be honest about my current position. "You might say I'm still gathering information."

"Unbelievable. Doing that is vital, but you're taking too long! Can't you make a quick judgment? Don't tell me that shady woman has led you astray?"

Why is she always so angry...? Gotta say, I'm impressed. You'd think she'd get tired of it.

Though there wasn't really any need for me to give her an answer, I got the feeling she would bother me even more if I didn't. I decided to just tell her what I'd been thinking.

"Well, in any case, I'd prefer not to work alongside the Puliliera siblings," I said.

Despite my efforts, she still yelled at me.

"Then how have you not yet decided which side you're taking?!"

“I told you, I’m still finding out more...”

While I was thinking to myself what a pain this woman was, the android maid behind her came to my rescue.

“Milady, everyone has their own way of doing things. You mustn’t impose your own approach or way of thinking on other people.”

“But...”

“Yes, yes,” the maid said. “Now, shall we go and gather information ourselves?”

“H-Hold on...!”

The android maid took Fialka’s arm. “Well then, Mr. Ouzos. Please excuse us.”

Then, with a big grin on her face, she took Fialka away.

Thanks, android maid!



Aside: Shelley

After I had dragged my mistress back to the oversized hangar where our mother ship, the Uklimo, was docked, she immediately began to complain.

“Shelley! Why did you stand in my way?!”

“Milady, your objective was to determine which faction Mr. Ouzos intended to join, correct?”

“That’s right! But he hadn’t even decided yet!” she whined.

I knew very well that my mistress was feeling impatient. On this occasion, it appeared that she wanted to fight in the same faction as Mr. Ouzos, so she very much wanted to learn which side he had chosen.

I suppose it was to be expected that because Miss Fadiluna Puliliera was so very pretty—and because she had sided with Baroness Glient—my mistress would think that Mr. Ouzos was likely to choose that side as well.

Although it was only my personal opinion, I felt that siding with Baroness Glient was the last thing he should do. I knew it would certainly upset my

mistress as well.

“Milady, let us do the right thing and side with Count Rosello,” I said. “You can see yourself that Baroness Glient is of dubious character, can’t you? It looks like Mr. Ouzos plans to do the same.”

“But he said he hadn’t decided yet...”

I interrupted my mistress and continued my lecture.

“‘Haste makes waste.’ ‘Look before you leap.’ Even if one’s mind is already made up, it is always best to exercise caution. Mr. Ouzos surely understands this as well.”

“All right... I’ll do that, then.” My mistress continued to fiddle with her hair, but she seemed to have been convinced by my arguments.

While she still might’ve looked reluctant to an outside observer, having watched over her from the moment of her birth, I could tell that she was now absolutely convinced.

“Now then, let’s start inspecting our own ship!”



By evening, I had finished all of my checks. After making a shopping list of sundry items, I headed downtown.

I wasn’t simply headed there to buy the things on that list, however. I wanted to scrutinize the information I’d gathered. It wasn’t like I couldn’t trust what Gonzales had said, but there was no harm in me double-checking.

When I had ended up fighting for Count Baccahoa a little while ago, part of the reason I’d made that blunder was because Gonzales’d had customers waiting for medication when I had visited. I had ended up taking the job without managing to learn much first.

Although thanks to that decision, I hadn’t ended up fighting *against* Rossweisse, so perhaps I should’ve considered myself lucky.

Next, I headed to a place in a secluded corner of the city’s downtown that was simply known as the Fortune Teller’s Building.

The fact that these kinds of businesses still continued to operate even after fortune-telling had been shown to be unscientific and without any basis in reality meant that there just might've been something about them that spoke to human nature.

That being said, I hadn't come to have my fortune read.

After proceeding far into the depths of the mazelike building, I entered a store whose sign simply read "Crystal Ball Fortune-Telling." There was dark green shag carpeting on the floor to muffle one's footsteps, and the walls and ceilings were that sepia-tinted off-white color that was probably the original interior paint job.

Against one of the walls was a table with a deep purple cloth over it, and an old woman in a gray, hooded robe sat on the opposite side. With her slightly hooked nose, she really looked just like a witch.

"Oh, welcome," she said. "So kind of you to visit this old lady. Is something troubling you? Or have you lost something?"

"No, I'd just like to ask you something. I'd like to know about Count Rosello and Baroness Glient," I said as I set an envelope filled with cash credits down on the table.

"I see, I see. Well, let me see what I can *divine*."

This old lady was a fortune teller, but she was also an informant like Gonzales. Fortune-telling actually seemed to be her main line of work, though.

In that case, I thought that she should probably make the inside of this store look a bit more like a proper fortune teller's den, but the old lady had other ideas.

As she put it, "Certainly, atmosphere is important, but it has nothing to do with a fortune teller's abilities. Besides, curtains and wallpaper are surprisingly expensive."

Naturally, she had a lot more experience as an informant than Gonzales, and the information she provided was highly reliable.

After slipping my envelope into her pocket, the old lady held her hands over

her crystal ball and started muttering some sort of incantation to herself.

Incidentally, this crystal ball was actually a monitor that had been set up so it couldn't be seen by a customer while it displayed information for the old lady to read. Her "incantations" were probably just activation keywords.

There was a prolonged silence.

"Hmm... It looks like Count Rosello is well regarded in his territory. At the very least, the count is no idiot and seems to understand what he needs to do for the sake of his territory's development. It seems the only problems he's wrestling with are that there are too many people wanting to immigrate to his territory and his inability to attract women," she explained. "House Glient's territory, on the other hand, has been in very poor shape ever since the baron died. Taxes have been raised sky-high. Also, you mentioned that this war was sparked by an oil painting by a famous painter, right? While I can't tell which one of them is the rightful owner, would you like to hear my opinion?"

The old lady grinned before thrusting her hand towards me, palm outstretched. In other words, she wanted more money.

Though she had said it was only her personal opinion, it was almost certain to be true. There was value in hearing what she had to say.

I set a few loose paper bills down on the table. "Sure. Please tell me."

The old lady immediately shoved them into her pocket. "It looks like Baroness Glient definitely stole the painting," she stated definitively. "She did it for money and to snare herself a new man."

She looked at me for a moment.

"The look on your face tells me that you're wondering how I knew that," she said. "The reason is simple. Baron Glient's predecessor was a prime example of a wretched noble. There's no way he would have shown kindness to a mere painter—a commoner. The baroness's late husband who died due to illness was a relative who had simply inherited the previous baron's name and title. Also, the reports that the baroness had three husbands die before Baron Glient are only counting noblemen. If we count commoners as well, there are bound to be more dead husbands. When she decided to try and marry into the nobility, she

probably changed her name and appearance. If you do end up siding with Baroness Glient, be careful. Unlike me, that woman has a very dark past.”

After explaining the reasons for her certainty, the old lady laughed in delight.

I couldn't help myself. “You look like you have a pretty dark past yourself, you know?”

“Compared to her, I'm as pure as the driven snow... Hee hee hee!” She then proceeded to cackle exactly like a witch.

Considering that this old woman and Gonzales were trustworthy informants, I decided that if the numbers seemed to be leaning in the baroness's favor, I would give the whole conflict a pass.

And so, starting two days before the application deadline, I would make my way to the Mercenaries Guild each evening to find out how many mercenaries had decided to accept the mission and what portion of them supported each side.

Those in the protagonist camp (guys like Mr. Hero aka Yuri Puliliera, Major Riol Barnekust, and many others) were always going to shower me with words of abuse like “coward” and “yellow.”

What's so wrong with taking some precautions in order to survive, huh?

My chance of biting the dust was way higher than it was for those special people ordained by God.

In the end, when I inquired about the numbers on the evening of the application deadline, I learned that approximately six hundred mercenaries were going to participate, with eight out of ten siding with the count and two out of ten siding with the baroness.

So, while I still had some lingering doubts, I decided to accept the count's request.

NPC No. 21: “Looking Into Such Things Is Also Part of a Mercenary’s Job. Am I Wrong?”

The deadline was fast approaching, and by the time I finished my application, most of the mercenaries around me had already left the lobby in order to depart for battle.

Thankfully, the Puliliera siblings were nowhere to be seen.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, Old Man Lohnes spoke to me.

“Despite all the siblings’ efforts, more of you ended up supporting the count. Looks like we still have some mercenaries who can make sound judgments.”

“Could it be that you knew more than you let on?” I asked.

“Looking into such things is also part of a mercenary’s job. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re absolutely right...”

I guess the people passing on requests would have to do at least a little digging of their own.

Though it might sound mean-spirited, that was also proof of the guild’s respect for each mercenary’s own volition and their commitment to remaining neutral.

Well, even if they had shared more information, I probably still would have paid a visit to my informants—my friend and the old lady.

At any rate, the application procedure was complete, and I’d already made my battle preparations. There was nothing left for me to do but take off for the sector designated for combat and get to work.

The chosen battlefield on this occasion was the Nagan sector, which sat at the exact midpoint between the respective territories of House Rosello and House Glient.

We were unable to detect the presence of the enemy forces at the moment, so they were likely still busy checking their ships and refueling.

Incidentally, within the count's faction to which I belonged, both guild mercenaries and soldiers from the count's private army could be heard praising the achievements of one Lambert Reargraz over the open transmission channel—though to be more accurate, they were actually Rossweisse's achievements.

By the way, he had recently been promoted to Rook.

Since he had fainted in each and every battle so far, I wouldn't have been too surprised if he had decided to disembark from his ship out of fear today.

Rossweisse explained to me, "If he were to leave me before I find a more suitable partner, I wouldn't have anyone to resupply my fuel and ammunition. Every time he faints, I flatter him, saying 'That was all you, you were just piloting me in a heightened state of awareness! You're amazing!' And he hasn't wet himself since his first mission either."

Taken in by Rossweisse's sweet talk, Lambert still found himself unable to leave his ship behind. In other words, you could say he was more or less her puppet.

What a grim fate...

Another popular person in our camp was Fialka—aka Léopard.

Well, she's pretty gorgeous and strong to boot, so it's no surprise she'd be popular with men and women alike.

I furtively asked Rossweisse about the Puliliera siblings and Fialka. "Come to think of it, there was a woman of Bishop rank and her younger brother—haven't you thought of inviting one of them aboard? And I don't know whether or not you're familiar with her, but there's Fialka too."

Given their abilities and their looks, I would have thought they'd be right up Rossweisse's alley, but she immediately assumed an expression of obvious displeasure.

"I can't work with that brother and sister—they're like the living embodiment of man-hating feminism. And I think everyone around the sister is sympathetic

to her views too. You better not get involved with those people either. The brother also takes his feminism too far while being totally self-centered at the same time! The only people suitable to pilot me are those who combine both talent and character.”

I guess I agreed, apart from the last part of her explanation.

Also, the two siblings are probably both on the other side anyway. I hope I don't run into them...

“And as for Lady Léopard—aka Fialka Tielsad—whenever I attempt to contact her, that maid of hers always answers instead. She gets in the way not only when I contact the mother ship, but even when I reach out to her Versitool directly.”

Rosswesse pouted theatrically, clearly irritated that she couldn't even extend an invitation to the partner of her dreams.

So she even interrupts Rosswesse's attempts at making contact... That maid is quite shrewd.

At that moment, a portly, middle-aged man appeared on my monitor via the open channel.

“Ahem. I would like to address all of the officers and soldiers in my dominion who are participating in this battle, as well as all of the mercenaries who have joined forces with my army. I am your lord and employer respectively—Tradam Rosello. I have been granted the title of count,” he said, introducing himself. “I'm sure you're all aware of this, but the cause of this war was a solitary oil painting. Though I used to have it in my manor, somebody stole it. Assuming that Baroness Glient simply came by the painting by coincidence, I was willing to buy it back from her for what I originally paid, or even at a premium. Alternatively, if she had said it ought to be donated to the Imperial Art Gallery, I wouldn't have minded that either. And if she had simply said that she liked the painting and wished to purchase it, we might have found a compromise. However, I was shocked to find that she insisted that it had been in her family's possession from the very beginning and was willing to declare war over it. When I told her I'd happily let her have it as it was only a dusty old painting, she refused to retract her declaration, claiming I had raised suspicions against her

and that she needed to restore her honor. Not only that, but she told me to hand over everything in my possession, including my territory, by way of apology for doubting her. There are already unfortunate rumors about the baroness. This affront cannot be tolerated! Soldiers, mercenaries, for the sake of my citizens, I would like you to give this battle your all! I'm hoping all of you perform your duties and return safely!"

In terms of appearance, much like me, the count certainly didn't look like he'd be popular with the ladies. However, considering that he had tried to avert this war and expressed his hopes that even we mercenaries should return safely, it looked like his good reputation was well-earned.

We then received instructions on what positions we should take from someone who seemed to be the commander of the count's private army. Once we had all finished confirming the command hierarchy, an order was issued for all hands to advance.

Thus the curtain was lifted on a territorial squabble sparked by a single oil painting.



Aside: Baroness Elizalia Glient

House Glient's manor stood on Planet Yabyon. In a room within that manor was Baroness Glient—otherwise known as Elizalia Glient.

Sitting back in an office chair with her legs pressed together firmly, she nonetheless sat up straight as a rod.

The worried expression on her face was fitting for a baroness of virtue.

She looked directly at the monitor of her holo-phone. It displayed her interlocutor, Fadiluna Puliliera.

"Do you really think we'll be all right?"

"Yes. We have nothing to fear from the kind of villainous count who would try to steal a national treasure from a frail woman!"

"I see... Well then, I'm counting on you," the baroness said and bowed her head apologetically.

Puliliera responded with an excess of confidence. “Please leave it to me!”

Then, once their conversation was over, the baroness raised her head and looked away from the monitor.

The relaxed mood in the room then changed most abruptly.

After getting out of her office chair, the baroness flopped down on a luxurious couch, crossing her legs and leaning against its armrest.

“Simpletons like that really are easy to manipulate,” she said aloud. “Since she fancies herself a heroine, I only need to act meek and she’ll talk herself into anything. If this all goes to plan, I’ll end up with not only the painting but all the count’s territory. Then, I can treat myself to even greater luxury. I’ve started to deplete the fortune I’ve built up, so I really wish I’d blockaded this planet sooner to stop citizens from fleeing to other planets...”

Her attitude from a moment ago was nowhere to be seen and had been replaced by her true face of arrogance and frivolity.

“I have brought you your wine, my lady.”

The baroness’s maid appeared, holding out a tray with a glass of red wine upon it, positioned so that the baroness needed only to close her fingers around the glass’s stem to take it.

After picking up the glass and looking at its contents, the baroness proceeded to hurl the glass at her maid, who was still holding the tray.

The glass shattered. Blood ran from a cut on the maid’s cheek, and the spilled wine stained her clothes.

“Who told you to bring me *red* wine?!” the baroness yelled.

“But, only a short while ago, you said to bring red...”

“I changed my mind! How could you not understand that? You really are scum!”

The maid bowed her head and apologized. “I am deeply sorry...”

She knew that if she were to make any further excuses, she might be subjected to all manner of retribution by the thugs in the baroness’s private

army.

Perhaps knowing this full well, the baroness gave her maid a sneer of imagined superiority.

“I’m going to take a short rest,” she said. “You are to replace this carpet in the meantime. By yourself.”

“Yes, my lady.”

While laughing scornfully at her maid’s submissive response, the baroness exited her so-called office.

In just a few hours, that wealthy count’s territory will be all mine! I really can’t wait! I’ll buy new jewelry, new furs, new makeup... Oh, that’s right! I’ll also vacate this planet and build myself a new estate! I’ll sell off all my citizens for a bit of pocket money.

As she headed to her bedroom, the baroness was already thinking all about what to do with the territory she was about to obtain, counting her chickens before they’d hatched.

NPC No. 22: “Urgh... I’m Gonna Be Sick.”

The battle began at last.

I had been assigned to the left wing of the formation along with Rossweisse and Fialka. Putting their behavior and ways of speaking to one side, I knew that I could count on them.

Although the probability of survival in the left wing had risen sharply with all of us on it, I still couldn’t afford to let my guard down.

Others might’ve thought it made me look pathetic, but I fully intended on taking my usual maneuvers in order to survive. After all, the other side’s ranks were filled with mercs burning with a sense of duty, swearing to protect a baroness who pretended to be frail.

Here in outer space, there were two fleets of ships, each consisting of several hundred vessels of various sizes.

For a moment, I was overcome by the illusion that I was approaching an asteroid belt, but a sudden hail of cannon fire from both sides suddenly made it painfully obvious that I wasn’t looking at a bunch of boulders.

Gripping my vessel’s joystick, I raised my barriers and advanced towards the front line.

“Phew. That was a close one!”

One hour had now passed since the battle had commenced.

The enemy’s right wing had many skilled pilots who had fired upon our side with unerring accuracy. However, given that these mercs had either been recruited by those two siblings or had otherwise sided with the baroness after doing far too little research, it was no surprise that most of them were overly confident. They therefore entirely failed to keep in formation, and even the most impromptu acts of cooperation seemed to be beyond them. And, in some cases, their bark was far worse than their bite.

These failures gave our side many openings to take advantage of, so at this point in the battle, we actually seemed to be winning.

And out of all of us, Rossweisse was the one who truly amazed me. Her speed, reaction time, and mobility all far exceeded any human's. Her firepower was also formidable.

Fialka (aka Léopard) certainly distinguished herself as well, but she couldn't hold a candle to Rossweisse.

In the middle of our successful advance, we received a report stating that our right wing was starting to look overwhelmed.

Incidentally, the main fleets at the center on each side were in fierce competition with each other. The left wing, however—where Rossweisse, Fialka, and I all resided—seemed to be pushing the enemy back.

Regardless, none of us could afford to leave our present battleground, so the battle continued as it was.

Another thirty minutes passed.

Eighty percent of the ships in the enemy's right wing had either fled or been destroyed, and the remaining twenty percent seemed to have lost the will to fight. They were in no condition to carry on.

Out of our enemy's losses, seventy percent could be attributed to Mr. Cocky (or rather, Rossweisse).

Looks like sentient ancient superweapons really are amazing.

Naturally, that was conveyed back to the main fleet. After they had received this report, the leaders in the main fleet broke away from our two wings and immediately notified us of their plan to surround the enemy on three sides.

However, in the next moment, we were told that seventy percent of our right wing had suddenly defected. They were now attacking our main fleet and the remaining loyal units in the right wing.

We've been had.

I surmised that this had probably been the work of the Puliliera siblings.

And then, we received yet another notification from the main fleet.

“This is HQ. Half of the units in the left wing, go to the aid of the right wing! I repeat, half of the units in the left wing, go to the aid of the right wing! Remaining units in the left wing, continue your advance! We need you to do whatever damage you can to the enemy’s main fleet! We’ll leave it up to you how to divide your forces!”

Immediately after hearing that transmission, Rossweisse exclaimed, “I’ll be going to the right wing, then!”

She then headed in that direction at breakneck speed.

I bet she’s just looking for another puppet—I mean partner.

If that wasn’t it, maybe she simply still had some feelings of aggression to get off her chest.

After a number of mercs confirmed that Rossweisse (or, in their eyes, Lambert Reargraz) was headed to the right wing, I saw roughly half of our forces follow her. They were probably hoping to pick up any scraps she left behind.

I wasn’t about to follow them, however. I had a bad feeling about how things would go on the other side of the battlefield.



Aside: Yuri Puliliera

“All right! As soon as our sleeper units in the right wing of House Rosello’s fleet turn on the rest of the formation, we commence our bombardment! The left wing of House Glient’s fleet will advance after that! Let’s grant the beautiful and virtuous Baroness Glient a resounding victory!”

At my order, our forces all began their maneuvers.

I knew we could count on my sister.

After convincing so many mercenaries to come over to the baroness’s side, she had sent a significant portion of them to infiltrate the enemy faction where they would lie in wait until she saw the enemy’s left wing push forward.

Though it was a simple strategy, it also proved very effective.

Also, since we had chosen our sleeper agents from the mercenaries who had hit on my sister or leered at her—or leered at me, for that matter—even if they were all crushed, we wouldn't miss them.

I prepared myself to join the push forward. That count had the nerve to not only pick a fight with the baroness but to steal a national treasure from her as well. I was going to blast that vile man to space dust!

At that moment, a report came in from one of my allies.

“Enemy ships approaching! I can see one... No, there are many more following that one from a long way behind! They appear to have blown right through the center to get to us. The closer ship...bears the call sign Rossweisse! It's him, Lambert Reargraz!”

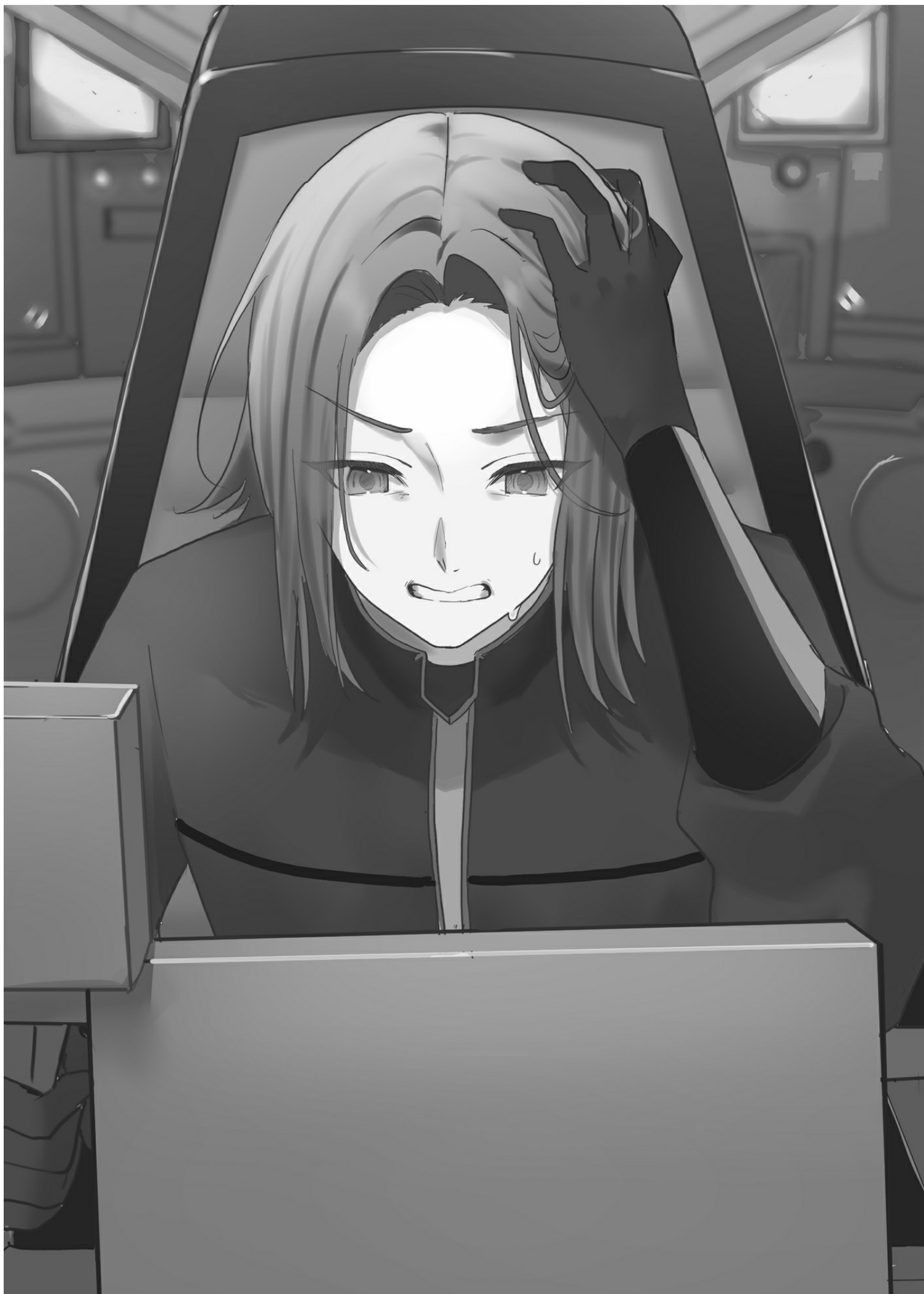
What, him? That man has got to be slated for a promotion to King rank already. But if he sided with the count, he's a fool. You're really going to challenge me, an agent of justice?! You will prove to be a worthy opponent!

“Leave him to me,” I said. “Go deal with the enemy's main fleet!”

I opened up my ship's throttle and headed towards Reargraz—that minion of evil. I was going to prove which of us was stronger—and who was just!

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit!!!

What gives?! Why haven't any of my attacks landed?! His allies who came after him were all blown away in the wake of our battle!



“Get it together, Yuri!” My sister’s voice rang out through my cockpit, interrupting my train of thought. I had just been on the verge of losing my cool after all my surefire attack patterns had failed.

If she’d been standing in front of me, she probably would have at least given me a slap in the face.

“That man is nothing more than the minion of a count who would dare to steal a national treasure from its rightful owner, the baroness!” she said. “If he failed to be enlightened by my arguments, then his life has no value. If we’re going to preserve the baroness’s life of elegance and comfort, we can’t afford to lose!”

Upon hearing my sister’s words, I was able to compose myself again.

“You’re right, sis! We’re on the side of a frail woman. We must be in the right.”

After firing myself up to rejoin the fight, I glared at the minion of evil before me.

At that very moment, someone contacted me over the open channel.

“Urgh... I’m gonna be sick.”

It was Lambert Reargraz himself.



Aside: Light Battlecraft WVS-09—Rossweisse

During our battle, I managed to eavesdrop on a conversation between the Puliliera siblings. The content of their discussion was, in a word, nauseating.

That woman’s—meaning Fadilan Puliliera’s—bald-faced, man-hating brand of feminism was really nothing more than a set of empty slogans to help her satisfy her own desires. And as a bonus, she appeared to have domesticated her own brother so thoroughly that he would listen to anything she—a woman—had to say.

If I had a living, breathing body, I’m sure I would have vomited at this point. That sense of nausea was so strong that I had unwittingly muttered my feelings

to everyone around over the open channel.

Incidentally, although he was lasting slightly longer before fainting with each mission we flew together, Lambert was presently down for the count. Therefore, for most of the battle, I'd been projecting a hologram of him when sending transmissions. I had even synthesized his voice to boot. I was sure I'd be fine.

As an aside, I had to wonder how someone like Fadiluna Puliliera had managed to get to Bishop rank. I had looked into it and had discovered that she didn't even belong to the Planet Ittsu guild branch, but rather the Planet Darde branch. She had made a particular effort to join her brother at his guild after having heard about this conflict from him.

As I was pondering this, the sister—Fadiluna Puliliera—started speaking to me. She obviously thought I was Lambert.

"I work on behalf of all women in the galaxy, and you find that nauseating? How very foolish. I might still forgive you, however. All you have to do is dispose of that daft, vile count for me."

Very clearly looking down on me, she had her gaze fixed on me with a bewitching smile.

It looks like you're so confident in your pretty face that you think Lambert the fainting dunce is about to become your ally. Isn't that right, Fadiluna Puliliera?

She must've known that the baroness was by no means sincere. The fact that she had allied herself with her anyway meant that she was probably receiving some additional compensation, and not via the guild.

"My, oh my, I guess I have no choice," I began. "I was going to let you off easy and hurt you a little just to make you be quiet, but now I'm going to have you take responsibility for making me feel sick!"

I think I managed to sound a bit like Lambert there.

While I couldn't quite accept the fact that this fainting dunce always got the credit, I resolved to discipline these nauseating siblings, just a little bit.

NPC No. 23: “We’re Lucky the Ship with the Winged Helmet Went to Support Their Right Wing. If He’d Come Here Instead, We’d All Be Space Dust Now.”

Immediately after Rossweisse and the rest of the detachment had left to support our right wing, those of us still in the left wing commenced our forward push, striving to attack the enemy’s main fleet.

Of course, it went without saying that the enemy responded by shoring up their own formation, getting ready to meet us in battle.

They sent lightcraft and drones, as well as battlecraft like medium-class destroyers, heavy cruisers, and even superheavy vessels like battleships. It was quite a formidable fleet.

This move meant that we would probably see a shift in the stalemate at the center of the fray, and if Rossweisse managed to defeat the enemy’s left wing, we would attain an even greater advantage.

While praying that the enemy didn’t have a surprise mecha on their side to turn the tide of battle, I lazily prepared myself to buy my allies some time.

I wish I could hit myself from five minutes ago for being so damned naive!

The enemy units that had come to intercept those of us still with the left wing were all very well-seasoned soldiers.

By observing their maneuvers, each pilot’s timing, and their level of coordination with each other, it was clear these pilots’ skills were on another level compared to the right wing we’d faced earlier.

After just barely dodging a seemingly endless barrage from one of them, I finally landed a hit.

For the last five minutes, I had found myself unable to let my concentration waver for even a split second. I had been pretty impressed by my own ability to

dodge all of that enemy fire.

But when I decided to press my advantage and approached the heavier vessels—meaning the destroyers, cruisers, and battleships—I was instantly blocked by the smaller vessels guarding them. The larger vessels took that opportunity to put plenty of distance between us, so I failed to get any closer.

To put it simply, not only were we not advancing, we were being forced to retreat.

This was pure speculation on my part, but I was getting the feeling that the majority of the enemy's main fleet was composed of wannabe mercenaries and criminals, meaning that their morale wasn't very high from the start.

Conversely, morale was high in the count's main fleet. His soldiers were much better trained, making for a stronger force.

I liked to think that it was the presence of regular troops, like the ones we were fighting now, who were responsible for the stalemate in the center of the battlefield.

At any rate, we simply had to find a way to withstand this tense situation until there was a greater shift in the tide of battle.

Just as I was thinking that, I saw the troops that had come to intercept us suddenly turn around and retreat.

Though I didn't know the reason they'd done that, there was always a chance that we'd be walking into a trap if we followed them past the front line. None of us who had remained in the left wing saw fit to give chase.

After watching them for a little while, we saw them suddenly turn and start to bombard their own force's main fleet.

I had no idea what the interceptor troops were thinking, but that didn't change the fact that this was our chance to strike.

An order came in from our main fleet. "Who knows what's going on, but keep on attacking! Try not to hit the enemy's interceptors!" It seemed that they had decided the enemy interceptors were now our allies.

"This is Reargraz from the support troops in the right wing. We have driven

off our defectors and the enemy's left wing. We will now commence our attack on the enemy's main fleet."

Rossweisse followed that order with a declaration in Lambert's (Mr. Cocky's) voice that the forces opposing our right wing had been defeated. It seemed like our victory for Count Rosello was assured.

Aside: Lieutenant Commander of the Enemy's Interceptor Force

The enemy's left wing commenced their charge against our flagship in the main fleet.

Given that our numbers in the center were depleted, we were forced to scramble to do whatever we could to hold back the enemy's advance.

"Lieutenant Commander, it looks like our forces are just barely managing to push back the enemy's left wing. If we carry on like this, it's only a matter of time before we have to make contact with their main fleet and commence our attack."

"We're lucky the ship with the winged helmet went to support their right wing. If he'd come here instead, we'd all be space dust now."

My adjutant—a first lieutenant—and my operator—a second lieutenant—both seemed somewhat relieved by the current state of affairs.

What they had said was certainly true, but we couldn't afford to let our guard down.

"Stay focused," I said. "They still have that Khaki and Lady Léopard on their side. Khaki in particular left me in a cold sweat when he brushed past me."

"It's a good thing your guard ships were deployed in time."

Though not as formidable as the Winged Helmet, Khaki and Léopard were still threats. It looked like we had no choice but to continue slowly pushing them back.

At that moment, my first lieutenant and adjutant spoke to me again.

"Lieutenant Commander... Count Rosello isn't the one we should *really* be fighting, is he?"

I knew that, of course. But there was a reason I couldn't act on that knowledge.

"We are soldiers in the late Baron Glient's private army. We're not under that treacherous vixen!" my adjutant insisted.

"Be that as it may, you're talking about Baroness Glient. She is still a noblewoman," I said.

"But Lieutenant Commander!"

"Give it a rest, First Lieutenant."

The first lieutenant continued to press his point with great enthusiasm, but I had a good reason for continuing to deny his proposal.

It wasn't just for my sake. It was for the sake of dozens of other people.

"First Lieutenant. Be quiet and return to your post," I ordered.

With reluctance written on his face, the first lieutenant headed back.

At that same moment, a report arrived from my operator.

"Commander! You have a message waiting! From Osseldepart!"

"Read it to me at once!" I yelled. I couldn't help but raise my voice upon hearing this news.

My operator read out the message, unable to contain his excitement. "'The two articles have been safely acquired. No damage. Other items also safely acquired. Heading to the pickup location now.' That is all."

This was news that I and a portion of my soldiers had been eagerly awaiting.

"You're worried about a delivery at a time like this?!" my adjutant cried, clearly irritated.

"Our families have just been rescued..."

"Huh?"

Not just me, but several of my subordinates were also weeping tears of joy after hearing this report.

The first lieutenant seemed shocked and bewildered by the reactions of those

around him, which was understandable. Only those of us in the army with families had been targeted for hostage-taking.

“Including me, a bit over a dozen soldiers had our families taken hostage, leaving us with no choice but to obey that woman. What you just heard was the signal from the resistance—that our families have been saved from her clutches and that after attacking the military installation she and her bandits stole, they’ve taken back the city. The hostages that woman took must have all decided to rise up against her!” I said. “There’s no longer any need for us to hold back—let’s go and defeat our true foe!”

The bridge of my ship erupted in cries of jubilation.

However, those cheers were quickly silenced by a gunshot.

It was the first lieutenant, my adjutant, who was responsible for the noise.

“What do you think you’re doing, First Lieutenant?”

The first lieutenant had aimed his gun at the ceiling at first, but now, he had turned it towards me. “Continue the battle against the count’s fleet.”

“Can I ask why you’re doing this, First Lieutenant?”

“I think you already know, don’t you?” he asked.

“Your attempt at provocation from earlier was fairly clumsy,” I said.

The first lieutenant scowled at me and adjusted his aim.

Everyone on the bridge tensed up. It was partly because I had a gun pointed at my face, but there was also the fact that if we stayed stationary much longer, our ship would soon be sunk by the enemy’s fleet.

“I knew all along that you were keeping an eye on us under that woman’s orders,” I said. “You’re unmarried, and you don’t have a girlfriend either. Your parents have both long since passed away, so she couldn’t threaten you by taking them hostage either. I guess she won you over by enticing you directly instead.”

Clearly irritated, the first lieutenant started to raise his voice. “Baroness Elizalia Glient is a wonderful woman! I won’t allow anyone to betray her!” He then pointed his gun at the floor and pulled the trigger again. “Hurry up and

continue fighting!”

“Calm down for just a moment, First Lieutenant.”

“Agh!”

Just as I tried reasoning with the first lieutenant, the second lieutenant—my operator who had been standing behind him—pressed an electric stun-stick against the back of the first lieutenant’s neck.

With a brief cry of pain, the first lieutenant crumpled to the floor on the spot. Other crew members on the bridge immediately restrained him.

I picked up the gun the first lieutenant had been holding. “This really is a pity. You were a good soldier. I guess that woman really is that ingenious in working her wiles. There’s even a possibility that you were brainwashed.”

Though he could no longer move, the first lieutenant glared back at me as I aimed the gun in his direction and pulled the trigger.

“Be that as it may, as far as we’re concerned, you’re just a traitor who was all too happy to lick the boots of our oppressor. I look forward to hearing your side of the story.”

The first lieutenant looked at the gun, which was now pointed at the floor, with a vexed look in his eyes.



Aside: A Third-Person Perspective

Facing the monitor in the office of her mansion, Baroness Glient raised her voice in anger.

“Hold on! What do those soldiers think they’re doing?!”

“They appear to be bombarding their own allies.”

“Why would they do something so reckless?!” she yelled.

This was because a segment of her forces had defected and were now engaged in friendly fire.

Faced with the sight of her forces slowly but surely losing a war that she had been certain she was going to win, Baroness Glient now openly displayed her

anger and agitation.

“It matters not,” she said. “Kill the family members we took hostage. Kill them in the cruelest way possible that will make them scream the most.”

Baroness Glient directed her anger at the hostages she had taken, issuing the order to take whatever measures would cause the fools who had defied her the most suffering.

“Yes, my lady.” The maid who had been standing to attention behind the baroness, although apparently ready to carry out her mistress’s orders, started to voice an opinion of her own. “However...”

“What is it?!”

“If you should lose this war, regardless of what you do, won’t your position be in question?”

“Indeed, that’s true...” Showing rare interest in her maid’s opinion, the baroness took her Versitool out from the desk in front of her. “So why don’t I blow everyone away with this? Then, victory will be mine.”

After looking at what was displayed on the Versitool, the maid’s expression stiffened. “Do you really intend to use that?”

“Of course I do! If I remotely activate Flare, the planet-destroying weapon that’s on our fleet’s flagship, then enemy and ally alike will be wiped out in the middle of the fray. Soldiers and mercenaries are disposable, so I’m not worried about them. I can take care of Count Rosello that way too, as a bonus,” she explained. “Isn’t that wonderful? Now, you just stand by and watch. I’m about to put on a beautiful fireworks display.”

With a smirk on her face, the baroness tapped the screen of her Versitool.

That being said, the weapon wasn’t designed to explode immediately, but rather three minutes after the switch had been triggered.

However, five minutes then went by without incident.

“Hold on! What’s going on?! Why won’t it explode?!”

The baroness hurled the Versitool to the floor in a fit of fury.

At that moment, her maid, who had been standing there in silence, suddenly spoke up. "It's no use. There won't be any explosion."

"What are you talking about?" asked the baroness, making no attempt to conceal her shock and irritation.

Her maid responded with the utmost calmness. "That bomb never existed in the first place. What you were shown was just a dummy, made to look the part."

These words had been the final straw. Finally recognizing the maid as her enemy, the baroness pressed a button on her phone. "Come to my room, if you would be so kind. I'd like you to show a woman who was stupid enough to defy me the most horrible, most demeaning fate that can befall a woman."

Having delivered those instructions, the baroness hung up and put some distance between herself and her maid.

Moments later, a group of burly men in black suits ran into the room like an avalanche.

"So good of you to join us," the baroness said. "Seize that woman at once."

Relieved by the arrival of these men, she then picked up her glass of wine to take an elegant sip, but the very moment she did so, she herself was seized by those same men.

She glared at them with a look of disbelief on her face. "What are you doing?! Not me, the maid!"

However, the men did not release their grip on her.

"You think you can get away with doing this to me?! Don't you know I have more than a hundred of my own bodyguards in this manor? You have no chance of escaping!" she screamed. Her words implied that she was certain her bodyguards would arrive at any moment.

But one of the men simply said, "We did come across your esteemed bodyguards, but once we killed one-tenth of them, the rest ran away. They made the right choice. No one would be willing to throw his life away to save the likes of you!"

The baroness had just learned a terribly horrifying fact from that man's lips.

She started to tremble and wailed wretchedly. "I'm a noblewoman! There's no end to the noblemen who have been enchanted by my beauty! I'll rule over all of you one day as empress! How dare you do this to me? You'll regret this!"

The maid then stepped towards the baroness. "How would you be fit to be empress? You're nothing but a perverted old bag trying to look younger than she really is."

The maid looked down at the baroness as if regarding a pile of filth.

"Elizalia Glient. The facts are that you're a woman who killed a man's wife, making it look like an accident, so you could marry him. Then, you murdered that man and his daughter to steal their fortune. Your real name is Gina Kalstaff, and that incident happened twenty years ago. At the time, Gina Kalstaff was in her early thirties. Considering that, you actually must be over fifty years old."

The baroness looked terrified. "I've never heard of that woman!" she cried, refuting the maid's words.

Still, the maid carried on.

"The ones you killed were your late husband, Zack Bordall, and his then wife, Cerika Bordall. But their daughter, Linda, survived."

"You lie! I made sure to kill her too, back then..." After looking back in shock, the baroness unwittingly blurted those words out before quickly shutting her mouth.

"You certainly did push Papa and me off that cliff. But Papa cushioned my fall, preventing me from hitting the water directly. That's how I survived."

"You lie! A child's body was definitely found!"

"Another child's body happened to wash up there by coincidence, but that's how I'm here today. When I came to work at this mansion, I thought I might be found out, but I wasn't. After all, my supposed death was a trivial matter for you, wasn't it?"

Once she was done revealing her own past, the maid grabbed the baroness by

the hair. “Don’t worry. I’m going to kill you in the cruelest way possible that will make you scream the most.”

Then, she smiled from ear to ear.

Seeing that grin, Baroness Elizalia Glient—or rather, Gina Kalstaff—was gripped by a deep, instinctual fear.



NPC No. 24: “You’re Saying You Want to Duel?”

When the enemy’s interceptors began attacking their own allies, those of us in our fleet’s left wing took that as our chance to commence our attack on the enemy’s main fleet.

With the combined strength of our side’s main force that had been engaged with the opposing fleet from the beginning, the enemy’s interceptors that had just betrayed them, and our right supporting wing—led by Rossweisse—that had destroyed both the enemy’s left wing and the insurgents from our side, we had no chance of losing.

However, even though our enemies were all pirates or wannabe mercenaries, it was not as if they were entirely without skill. And given that the main fleet was now joined by the remnants of their left wing that had fled from Rossweisse, we still couldn’t afford to let our guard down.

For the time being, I switched the settings on my IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) system to recognize the enemy interceptors as allies.

Just as I had expected, an apparently desperate detachment from the enemy’s fleet started heading towards us with an unusually fierce barrage of gunfire. They were probably hoping to escape from the battlefield.

“Stop the ships that are charging at you! Don’t let them get away!”

The command to intercept them had been issued from our main fleet, so everyone in the left wing, including me, went to face them.

They weren’t pushovers, however. Each ship was emblazoned with a hornet insignia, so they probably all belonged to the same band of pirates or wannabe mercenaries. There was no question in my mind as to their abilities.

They hadn’t charged towards us out of desperation—they actually intended to break through our left wing and assault our main fleet! That being the case, it was safer not to meet them head-on but to launch an attack from their flank or rear instead.

“Was there a band of pirates with that insignia? I’ve never seen it before,” I muttered absentmindedly to myself as I accelerated and launched my own attack on the enemy detachment’s flank.

Thankfully, I managed to take down a number of drones and a light battlecraft, but, of course, their counterattack soon followed.

Putting the drones to one side, the manned lightcraft actually maneuvered incredibly well. They were at least on the same level as the interceptors we’d just faced in skill, or maybe even better than them.

However, as a result of their evasive maneuvers, they had lost some of the momentum they were counting on to break through our ranks. I saw the head of their formation slow down a little.

I continued to launch the same kinds of attacks on the rest of them—firing at their flanks or from their rear. But despite my efforts, the Hornet Squadron’s charge did not slow down substantially.

I got the feeling that, if these guys and the interceptors had launched an all-out attack on us from the start and had coordinated their timing with our insurgents to press their advantage, we would have already lost.

At any rate, if we didn’t find a way to counter the Hornet Squadron’s charge, we would be in big trouble.

I trained my crosshairs on one of their cruisers and was stuck fast to its tail when I saw Fialka one step ahead of me. She whizzed past the drones and lightcraft around the vessel before engaging it in battle.

Though I figured she could probably handle the cruiser on her own, a number of pilots on our side, including me, provided her with covering fire to assist her charge.



Aside: Fialka Tielsad

Supported by covering fire from my allies, I approached the enemy cruiser.

The medium and heavy vessels on their side all halted their bombardment in fear of friendly fire. They knew that if they shot at me, the chance of them

hitting an ally of theirs was high.

Somehow managing to get within combat range of the cruiser, I started my attack, but no sooner had I done so than a blue light vessel appeared between us.

Like the other ships, it had a hornet insignia etched in white.

I suppose I'll call you the Blue Hornet for the moment?

When I flew straight at this ship and we shot past one another, I was convinced that I was about to be surrounded. But for some reason, the rest of their squadron continued to move away from me, leaving a few ships behind while the rest obediently followed their leader's charge.

Well, the charge was more important, so I guess I should have expected that.

However, the few ships that had stayed behind formed a line behind me, blocking my path back to my main fleet.

"A duel, huh...? Very well! I'll take you on!"

Though I could have fled, I knew they would give chase. I decided it would be better to take the duelist down instead.

I opened my ship's throttle and closed in on the Blue Hornet with the intention of getting behind him. Then, I unleashed a barrage of attacks.

However, he completely dodged my fire, almost as if he had eyes in the back of his head. He'd evaded me the moment I thought I had him, and it now looked like he was about to circle around behind me.

Stop joking around! I still have to attain victory over that man! There's no way I can afford to lose here!

I probably shouldn't have let myself get so flustered. Here, in the middle of a combat situation where everything could be decided in a split second, I reacted far too slowly.

"Eek!"

My opponent did not miss this opportunity and landed shots on one of my thruster nozzles and my engine. While my ship didn't explode, it was rendered

nothing more than a wreck in the middle of the battlefield. I was lucky to still be alive.

“Milady! Hurry! You need to escape!” Shelley urged.

It was just as she had said—I needed to get away quickly, but would my opponent allow me to do so?

The switch for my escape pod was still working, but it looked like getting away would be virtually impossible now. The ships that had been blocking my path back to our main fleet mere moments ago were now headed straight for me.



Though I had realized that Fialka had just started a duel with someone, I had to prioritize stopping the rest of the Hornet Squadron’s advance. I was sure Fialka—Léopard—would be fine anyway, so I focused all of my efforts on hindering my own targets.

After I and a few other ships managed to get within firing range of a cruiser and severely damage it, the speed of the Hornet Squadron’s charge was substantially hampered.

Just as I was thinking that the other cruiser that looked like their flagship would be our next target, I suddenly received a transmission from someone.

“I beg of you! Please save my mistress!”

The face on my monitor seemed to be that of the android maid who was always with Fialka. She was asking me to save her mistress, but stopping the Hornet Squadron had to come first. And if Fialka’s opponent had beaten her, then he must’ve been pretty tough.

And not only that, but saving a heroine like Fialka was supposed to be the job of a proven protagonist!

Wait, perhaps in this scenario where Fialka had just been defeated and was about to say, “Just kill me!” a member of the Hornet Squadron was meant to take up the mantle of the protagonist. He could save her and make her fall madly in love with him.

While I pondered that, the android maid cried sorrowfully. “I beg of you! The

enemy intends to shoot down my mistress's escape pod!"

Shooting down an escape pod was forbidden by the rules of engagement, so there shouldn't have been anything to worry about. There were people who would happily shoot them regardless, though.

"You're still in the area where we first engaged the Hornet Squadron?" I asked.

"That's right! Please help my mistress!"

"For now, please contact some other pilots on our side as well," I told her. "Given that Lady Léopard lost to this guy, I'm going to have a hard time too."

If Fialka, a Bishop-rank mercenary, had been put out of commission by her opponent, then he must have been quite skilled. It would be to our advantage to attack as a group and try to surround him.

After returning to the site of their battle with all due haste, I found Fialka's vessel floating immobile in space while two of the enemy's ships stood by to prevent her from ejecting her escape pod. The blue ship and two other vessels were looking on from a distance.

I see. So they're using that loophole.

While shooting down an escape pod violated the rules of engagement, destroying one before it ejected was not considered a violation.

This loophole was well-known enough that there were accounts of noblemen at the height of their power exploiting it. They, along with their wingmen, would surround their enemies before their foes could eject themselves. They'd seal off their enemies' escape routes and subject the pilots to gruesome deaths once they surrendered.

To start, I approached the two ships blockading Fialka at full speed and fired my beam as a warning shot to force them to move away from her. That allowed Léopard to immediately eject in her escape pod.

She should be fine now. Her maid can retrieve her pod later.

But I still had a problem.

That blue ship is probably the one that defeated Fialka.

From the looks of it, the craft was probably a customized Storm Zero from the Triasgita Company, the same kind of cutting-edge ship that Nosweil had piloted in battle.

I was convinced that I was going to be surrounded, but the blue ship's wingmen pulled back, forming a line to prevent me from retreating to our main fleet.

"You're saying you want to duel?"

Stop joking around! This kind of thing is a proven protagonist's job!

Wait, maybe in this scenario, the Blue Hornet was actually the protagonist. Had I just stopped him from trying to make the fallen female antagonist his ally?

My opponent's ship was definitely faster than mine, so it wouldn't be easy to make my escape. However, I still had to buy enough time for Fialka's pod to be retrieved.

Having resolved to do that much, I was going to try my Shot-Down Fake-Out!

After taking all power from my ship's systems save for steering, weapons, and radar and diverting it into propulsion, I shot towards my foe in a desperate bid to circle around behind him.

I only did that to prevent my opponent from being too cautious when he came to circle behind me.

However, if anyone was going to foil this plan, it would be a protagonist. I decided to prepare a backup plan too, just in case.

While I pondered what to do next, I executed a turn, a loop-the-loop, and a spin—the trajectory I needed to follow to get behind my opponent.

He followed my every move, occasionally firing his beam to restrict my movements as he got into position to shoot me down.

This whole time, no one from either side made any attempts to approach or attack either of us.

Sure, the enemy holding back was one thing, but why wasn't anyone from our side coming to help? Had Fialka's maid failed to put out a request for her rescue?

At any rate, as long as the enemy didn't interfere, I had a chance to execute my plan.

I opened my ship's throttle and flew in as close to a straight line as possible. My foe followed.

His beam grazed my ship, and I thought I was a goner for one moment.

Then, as soon as I thought we'd put sufficient distance between ourselves and his wingmen, I raised the nose of my ship. I opened the attitudinal thruster at the base of the ship at full blast for just an instant and then cut my main booster, having timed all of those steps so they'd be executed simultaneously.

As a result, my ship rotated as it flew past my opponent. All I had to do now was fire my beam at the same time, and I was sure to fill my target with holes.

However, I knew to expect more of a protagonist. He'd anticipated my maneuver and had raised his ship vertically, allowing him to dodge to the left at the last second.

I thought you'd try that!

So I fired my secret weapons—two photon torpedoes—in the direction where I expected my opponent to end up after finishing his turn, seemingly throwing them away. Then, I opened my main booster once again, flying outside the radius of the circle traced by the Blue Hornet's movements before executing my own vertical rotation and circling behind him again.

My opponent tried to make use of his superior speed to escape. I fired another beam to get his attention, forcing him to ignore the photon torpedoes I'd left floating in space nearby. When he finally realized they were still there and hurried to adjust his steering, that would be my chance to strike.

This was why I had painted my photon torpedoes matte black.

Of course, if I *did* shoot my torpedoes to detonate them, the blast wave would make it difficult to control my ship as well. It was a total gamble as to whether I would emerge unscathed.

Either way, when I saw my opponent hurry to evade the imminent blast, I knew it was my chance to strike!

“Bingo!”

My beam struck his boosters and part of his engine, leaving him unable to propel his ship properly.

I could have blown him away then and there, but I had a couple of concerns that prevented me from doing so. One was that the rest of the Hornet Squadron presented a more pressing issue as they were currently heading for our main fleet, but there was also the fact that the other Hornet Squadron members who had been blocking my route back to our main fleet were now headed here to rescue the Blue Hornet. Vainly hoping that they might be caught in the blast, I detonated my photon torpedoes, almost in place of a flash grenade, before quickly withdrawing from the battle zone myself.

By the time I caught up with the rest of the Hornet Squadron, they were already beginning their own retreat after receiving a furious head-on barrage from our main fleet. They were also about to be pursued by our left wing.

Just fifteen minutes after the enemy interceptors had launched their attack on their allies, both wings of our enemy’s formation had been wiped out. The Hornet Squadron—likely provoked by the betrayal of the interceptors, their most elite troops—had retreated from their charge against our main fleet. The enemy’s defeat was now assured.

Moreover, just as I expected, since the remainder of the enemy’s forces was made up of wannabe mercenaries, pirates, and thugs, the baroness’s army was forced to quickly issue a total surrender.

After they had conceded, Count Rosello said, “I have just accepted House Glient’s army’s surrender. Put down your arms and begin rescuing survivors and taking in the wounded.”

After this declaration of armistice, he continued. “Officers, soldiers, and mercenaries. Thanks to all of you, my territory was protected, and the oil painting is even going to be returned to me. There are some who lost their lives in this battle, and I pray that they shall rest in peace. I intend to continue to govern in such a fashion as to respect their memory.”

With those words of renewed commitment, this conflict had finally come to an end.

NPC No. 25: “All Right. Listen Up.”

The conflict between House Rosello and House Glient had ended in a victory for House Rosello.

Normally, I would have received payment for my services on the same day as the mission, but due to a number of difficulties processing our contracts, we were instead promised payment two days later.

And so, two days after the day of the conflict, I made my way to the Mercenaries Guild to collect my compensation.

“Sup. I’ve come to collect my pay.”

There were several hundred mercenaries besides me here crowding the reception lobby, so I naturally went to Old Man Lohnes’s desk. There were already people waiting there—no doubt in part due to the size of the crowd—so I quietly took my place in line.

About fifty minutes later, it was finally my turn.

“Hey. You made it back,” he said.

“Yeah, somehow.”

With a sleep-deprived look on his face, Old Man Lohnes began sorting through the usual paperwork.

“This one was really a pain in the ass. I can’t believe they formed a sleeper cell...”

Apparently, that aspect of the mission had created a lot of burdensome extra work for the guild.

Despite his utter exhaustion, the old man handed me my pay. “There. You’re good to go.”

“Are you okay? Shouldn’t you take a break?”

“Once I’ve finished today’s work, I’ll be taking a long break,” said Lohnes, though he looked like he was just hanging on by a thread.

Fortunately, there was no one else waiting behind me, so I made a suggestion.

“I know—why don’t you give me a *thorough* explanation of what went on during the mission?”

“I could do that... But why would I?” he asked.

“As long as you’re talking, you can rest from your work,” I offered. “And I really do have a lot of questions to ask.”

The old man suddenly had a much sharper look in his eye as he took out a plasti-carton of coffee. “All right. Listen up.”

Thus I managed to convince him to explain to me how the mission had panned out, and it turned out that the outcome really had been very burdensome for the guild.

First of all, there was the matter of how a number of mercenaries had betrayed Count Rosello’s army and joined the baroness’s side instead, creating a lot more paperwork for the guild.

“The guild does not concern itself with its mercenaries’ conduct on the battlefield. We pass on requests from both sides in such conflicts and recruit mercenaries for both of them, so that shouldn’t be our problem. If mercenaries defect, that’s the client’s responsibility.”

The guild had always presented that self-centered bit of reasoning for why they would not accept any complaints from clients. Though, of course, that didn’t mean they didn’t get any complaints.

He went on. “Infiltration—sneaking behind enemy lines in order to guide your allies to victory—is a fine strategy. However, in the case of these mercenaries, that took the form of betraying their initial client, so the points they would have received towards promotions were cut in half. And they’ll have to receive their compensation from the side they ended up on after their betrayal.”

It turned out that, besides having their rank progress points halved, the guild did not impose any penalties on traitors.

However, those mercenaries would be getting dirty looks from now on, and it could count against them in the future when clients would submit work requests for specific mercenaries. Because of those consequences, no mercenaries ever actually betrayed their clients, so what'd happened in this mission had apparently been an anomaly.

And, as a result, the mercenaries who had defected from the count's army to join forces with the baroness seemed quite ashamed of what they'd done.

Though those mercenaries who'd supported her from the start had committed no offense, Baroness Elizalia Glient had been captured by resistance forces on her planet. Once the resistance had assumed control, any remaining funds that could have been used to cover mercenary compensation had simply vanished.

It would have been customary for the baroness to at least pay the fees of any mercenaries who had accepted her initial request to the guild in advance, but she apparently hadn't done that.

However, the soldiers in her interceptor squadron had apparently appealed to the resistance, saying, "We can't help but feel sorry for those guys. All they did was accept her request."

Although the baroness had left behind myriad failures and shortages in her own economy, the new regime was nonetheless able to come to a compromise to pay five hundred thousand credits across the board.

Considering the fact that the initial figure posted for compensation was five *million* credits each, each mercenary was to receive one-tenth of what was promised.

In contrast, those who had supported Count Rosello not only received their basic compensation of three million credits but an additional bonus of five hundred thousand credits. Each mercenary who had taken part on his side had earned a total of 3.5 million credits.

On top of that, when I furtively asked about Mr. Cocky (Rossweisse, really) I learned that he had received a further bonus of five hundred thousand credits, for a total of four million credits.

And in the case of those who had lost their lives in battle, the compensation for this mission—along with all of their belongings—would be handed over to their families, romantic partners, or whomever else they had designated in their wills. Other than that, their belongings would be dealt with in accordance with whatever was written in their wills.

At the same time, the guild itself provided additional funds to the bereaved (at various amounts), which was offered regardless of the faction the deceased had sided with. Their surviving family members would also conduct their funerals.

In the event that a mercenary had no surviving family and hadn't left any will behind, the guild would seize ownership of their pay and their belongings. For those mercenaries, there would be no funeral and the guild would merely take care of the necessary paperwork.

For that reason, most mercenaries did take the time to write wills and had them stored on guild premises.

Now, when it came to the Puliliera siblings... Apart from having hit me, the brother—Yuri Puliliera—was entirely honest and upstanding and no one had blamed him for anything.

However, as for his sister, Fadiluna Puliliera, it had emerged that she had previously seduced and persuaded a guild executive to allow her to rise up to Bishop rank without taking the required exam.

She had apparently committed a number of other offenses as well, so she was going to be arrested immediately upon her return to the guild. However, after destroying a number of ships in the guild's hangar and blocking access to the exit, she had stolen another of the guild's ships and made a clean getaway.

Incidentally, because a number of mercenaries had their ships destroyed in this incident, her brother—Yuri Puliliera—had started to get a lot of dirty looks from those around him. It seemed that he had been totally unaware of his sister's impropriety.

By the way, although the baroness was scheduled to be executed in the coming days, the empire's central authorities had apparently declined to make any further comment on the matter.

Rumor had it that she had traded her way through several dozen husbands over the years, marrying each of them for money before later murdering them. She had apparently been found guilty of that and was being treated as a convicted criminal.

I bet there were a lot of victims...

The authorities had probably also decided they should try to make Count Rosello their ally.

Incidentally, the pirates and other criminals who had sided with the baroness had also been detained and handed over to the police.

"Well, that's about that."

Old Man Lohnes gulped down the rest of his plasti-carton of coffee and belched forcefully.

I took this lull in our conversation as an opportunity to ask about something that had been bothering me.

"Come to think of it, do you know of any pirate or mercenary band that bears a hornet emblem?"

"A hornet? Nah, doesn't ring a bell."

"Really?" I asked. "Given how amazing their pilots were, I would have thought their group would be widely known, whether they were pirates or mercenaries."

Though I couldn't put my finger on why, I just had the feeling that their real goal hadn't been to take out Count Rosello.

I mean, given just how strong they were, if they had fought alongside the interceptor squadron from the beginning and timed their assault to coincide with the defection of part of our forces, they surely would have been able to

overwhelm our main fleet before Rossweisse could've come to its aid.

Well, there was no point in dwelling on that any more now.

Now I've just got to go through the usual steps to collect my pay. Then, I'm off to Animember to pick up some new volumes.

With that last thought still in my mind as I exited the guild building, I found Fialka standing outside the gates with her arms folded for some reason. She was glaring directly at me. Her android maid was with her too, eagerly standing by.

"Could I have a moment of your time, John Ouzos?" Fialka asked.

Though I keenly anticipated that something unpleasant was about to follow, I also felt that ignoring her and running away would just cause me more trouble in the long run.

I elected to obediently listen to what she had to say. "How can I help you?"

"This might not be the best place to have this discussion. Shall we go somewhere where we can relax?" her android maid said before guiding me—and Fialka, who seemed somehow bewildered—to a well-known and trendy chain café.

NPC No. 26: “Well... I Hear You and Understand Your Circumstances. But I Know That One Day, You’ll Meet Someone Who Understands and Values Your Abilities. You Would Do Well To Keep That in Mind.”

Thus we ended up going inside a famous and trendy chain café. It seemed nice, but I felt awfully uncomfortable. After all, a fairly notable beauty and her maid had dragged me there, so there was no way we weren’t going to stand out.

We lined up at the counter, ordered and paid, waited a bit, picked up our orders, and finally brought everything to our seats. While we hadn’t looked all that strange at first, as soon as we all sat down at the same table, the looks from the other patrons really started to sting.

I hoped to conclude our business quickly, so I immediately tried to draw out Fialka’s real motive as soon as I’d taken my first sip of coffee. “So, what can I do for you?”

After looking down for a spell, Fialka (aka Léopard) coughed slightly. “Erm... Thank you for rescuing me on the battlefield the other day.”

Then, she and her maid bowed their heads deeply in unison.

“Ah... Well, I only headed your way after your maid there asked me to, so it’s not as if I realized you were in trouble all by myself.”

What was more was that at the time, I really hadn’t felt like going to help, so it really pained me to be thanked like this.

“Even so, the fact remains that you did rescue me, so I wanted to thank you properly.”

“That’s very polite of you...”

I was pretty sure that Miss Léopard was the daughter of a nobleman. Despite

that, she really was quite conscientious.

All right... If that's all you wanted to tell me, can I go home now?

If I were to let a beauty like this keep bowing her head to me, who knew what the people around me might say? I was scared to find out.

Then, with a serious expression, Fialka said, "Say... Why haven't you taken the exam to advance to Bishop rank? Why don't you display your true prowess and force the people around you to recognize it? You told me before that the promotion exam, as well as the human interactions that promotion would necessitate, would just be too much trouble. I wonder if you could tell me the reasons for that in a bit more detail?"

She was pressing me hard for more information.

Rather than run away and risk getting waylaid again, I decided I would be much better off getting her to accept my reasons now and refrain from bothering me again in the future. And so, I figured that I'd explain why I wouldn't take the Bishop promotion exam.

"First of all, most mercenaries at Bishop rank and above are nobles," I began. "If I were to join their ranks and put up better battle results than them, I would either be accused of cheating somehow or they would try to push past me and take all the credit. Either way, the probability that my achievements would be treated as never having occurred is extremely high. Another important factor is my home planet—I come from Planet Ittsu."

"I see... I believe both our previous and current imperial majesties have spared no effort to strengthen penalties against noblemen and do away with the inequality that exists between colonies and other worlds..." she said.

"Such things aren't so easily erased. Besides, people can always find fault with my physical appearance too. People already take issue with my looks now at Knight rank, but if I ever moved up to Bishop rank, complaints like 'Someone who looks like you has no business being a Bishop!' would probably become an everyday occurrence."

I was fully aware of how I looked, so such comments didn't bother me too much as things stood.

Having spoken a bit too much all at once, I paused to swallow down some coffee and take a deep breath.

“Apart from that, people might try to stop me from getting work. Though it doesn’t happen all the time, people have tried paying off guild receptionists to discourage them from dealing with me,” I added.

Thanks to Old Man Lohnes, I was able to earn a stable living taking on guild work these days, but back when I’d just started out as a mercenary, that kind of thing had happened to me a lot. There were other receptionists who had refused to deal with me after being threatened by nobles, but others had spontaneously refused me just because they didn’t like the way I looked.

On top of that, even when I had decided to complain about this treatment, it had turned out that nobles had even influenced the guild counselors I had gone to talk to. My concerns ended up having been ignored.

About three months after I had started working with the guild, there had been a personnel shuffle and Old Man Lohnes had started working in reception. If he hadn’t been moved there, I might have quit and joined the army. I’d be dead already from overwork or being chewed up and spat out some other way if that’d happened.

“Do you mean to tell me that guild employees were complicit in impropriety?” she asked. “If so, surely you should be able to sue them!”

Fialka clenched her fists, clearly incensed by the idea of guild employees being involved in that. She had probably never been the target of such treatment herself.

“Anyway, I have no desire to advance further. If I achieve a greater status, I’ll only be given more duties and responsibilities. It’s best to leave those things to more suitable people,” I explained.

“You’ll end up taking orders from mercenaries with less experience than you once they move up in rank. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“I’m no good at giving orders or proposing battle plans, so I’d rather leave that to more capable people.”

In a manner of speaking, that was probably my number one reason. If I were

to move up to Bishop rank, I would find myself needing to give orders and coordinate other mercenaries more often. However, I had to admit that I'd never been good at ordering other people around or inspiring courage in them. It was better to leave those things to people who were better at it.

Fialka tried to appeal to me fervently. "But...someone with your abilities wouldn't be out of place in *Queen* rank, don't you know that?! Are you really fine with people treating you so unjustly?"

"Thank you for your excessive praise. However, rather than being thought of as strong and provoking caution from my opponents, I'd prefer to be derided as weak and have them lower their guard instead."

Though I was genuinely thankful for her concern, I was already used to unjust treatment. It was too little, too late.

More importantly, when the going got tough, it really could be advantageous at times to be treated like small fry and have my opponents let their guards down around me.

Regardless, those were all the reasons why I was refusing to be promoted to Bishop rank.

Having heard all that, Fialka pondered my arguments for a spell with a serious expression on her face.

"Well... I hear you and understand your circumstances. But I know that one day, you'll meet someone who understands and values your abilities. You would do well to keep that in mind," she said.

While she'd said that, there was no way anyone was ever going to properly value a dork like me. I had resigned myself to that fact already, so what was the big deal, you know?

"Also, I'd just like to repeat this one last time: Thank you for rescuing me, *Mr. Ouzos*," Fialka said again with a courteous bow.

"Ah, no, no. Think nothing of it."

I had to admit it—compared to all of the nobles who had harassed me up to that point, something about her was just a little bit different.



Aside: Fialka Tielsad

Ouzos—the NPC—was having a conversation with Lohnes.

But as soon as I caught sight of him, for some reason, I stepped outside the building.

“What are you doing, milady?”

“Nothing... I just felt a little nervous...”

“Weren’t you going to thank him for rescuing you?”

“I know, I’m going to!”

During my last mission, I had been defeated by the Blue Hornet on the battlefield. And with that ace pilot’s wingmen blocking my only route of escape, I had been about to be killed.

It had been *him* who saved me in that moment—John Ouzos.

I’d been helped by others, both men and women, many times in the past. On each such occasion, I had managed to express my utmost gratitude for their assistance. Even though this had been the first time I’d needed help since becoming a mercenary, this occurrence was surely just one of many.

So...why did I feel so nervous?!

“Look. He’s coming outside, milady,” my maid said.

“I can see that!”

I hurried the rest of the way out the gates and stood there to wait for Ouzos, blocking his path.

“Could I have a moment of your time, John Ouzos?”

“How can I help you?”

This man’s obviously bewildered right now, and I think I just saw a barely perceptible look of annoyance come over him.

I couldn’t help but be irritated by his reaction myself, but I found myself unable to think of a way to say so.

Then, Shelley said, “This might not be the best place to have this discussion. Shall we go somewhere where we can relax?”

After that, she dragged us to a nearby Planet Shot Café location.

Hold on, Shelley! This wasn't part of our plan at all!

After arriving at the café, we put in our orders, received them, and then sat down at an empty table.

Ouzos seemed restless, but after taking a sip of his normal, regular-sized coffee, he asked, “So, what can I do for you?”

After taking a deep breath and coughing slightly, I said the words I was honor bound to say.

“Erm... Thank you for rescuing me on the battlefield the other day.”

I said it! I've thanked people countless times in the past, but wow, this is the first time I've ever felt so nervous!

“Ah... Well, I only headed your way after your maid there asked me to, so it's not as if I realized you were in trouble all by myself.”

“Even so, the fact remains that you did rescue me, so I wanted to thank you properly.”

“That's very polite of you...”

I'm all agitated, so why does this man—John Ouzos—seem so calm?!

Well, he's older than me and has had a longer career as a mercenary, so he's probably had plenty of experiences like this, but...something about this still pisses me off!



In any event, since I had the opportunity, I thought I would ask him to explain in detail why he hadn't sought promotion to a higher rank.

"Say... Why haven't you taken the exam to advance to Bishop rank?" I asked. "Why don't you display your true prowess and force the people around you to recognize it? You told me before that the promotion exam, as well as the human interactions that promotion would necessitate, would just be too much trouble. I wonder if you could tell me the reasons for that in a bit more detail?"

I had put the question to him as calmly as I could. Up until this occasion, I had always pressed him for an answer with an air of irritation and had even shouted at him. It was understandable that he had found me annoying.

Ouzos was silent for a while, but then he opened his mouth to speak.

"First of all, most mercenaries at Bishop rank and above are nobles. If I were to join their ranks and put up better battle results than them, I would either be accused of cheating somehow or they would try to push past me and take all the credit. Either way, the probability that my achievements would be treated as never having occurred is extremely high. Another important factor is my home planet—I come from Planet Ittsu."

What Ouzos had described was a problem the empire had struggled with since the distant past.

A long time ago, long before I had even been born, it had simply been accepted that noblemen would freely use their authority and violence to steal all manner of things from commoners, often without even a semblance of reason. And as for those living on colony planets, I had heard they had been subjected to even crueler treatment.

"I see... I believe both our previous and current imperial majesties have spared no effort to strengthen penalties against noblemen and do away with the inequality that exists between colonies and other worlds..." I suggested.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the previous and present occupants of the imperial throne—as well as His Excellency the Duke, the younger brother of the emperor before the previous one—the number of nobles who committed such acts had been steadily decreasing.

However, these injustices could not be eliminated all at once, of course, and the issue of nobles committing senseless acts—as well as general inequality between subjects from different worlds—had still not been entirely ameliorated.

“Such things aren’t so easily erased. Besides, people can always find fault with my physical appearance too. People already take issue with my looks now at Knight rank, but if I ever moved up to Bishop rank, complaints like ‘Someone who looks like you has no business being a Bishop!’ would probably become an everyday occurrence.”

I don’t really know how to respond to that...

Though he certainly is chubby, besides that, he looks totally normal to me.

“Apart from that, people might try to stop me from getting work. Though it doesn’t happen all the time, people have tried paying off guild receptionists to discourage them from dealing with me.”

“Do you mean to tell me that guild employees were complicit in impropriety?” I asked. “If so, surely you should be able to sue them!”

I found myself clenching my fists tightly without meaning to. If even guild employees had gotten involved, then he might have had no recourse. Nothing like that had happened to me when I had been starting out, but I guess that could’ve been because I was of noble birth.

Come to think of it, there are sons and daughters of noble families among the guild’s employees...

“Anyway, I have no desire to advance further. If I achieve a greater status, I’ll only be given more duties and responsibilities,” he explained to me. “It’s best to leave those things to more suitable people.”

“You’ll end up taking orders from mercenaries with less experience than you once they move up in rank. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“I’m no good at giving orders or proposing battle plans, so I’d rather leave that to more capable people.”

“But...someone with your abilities wouldn’t be out of place in *Queen* rank,

don't you know that?! Are you really fine with people treating you so unjustly?" I asked.

"Thank you for your excessive praise. However, rather than being thought of as strong and provoking caution from my opponents, I'd prefer to be derided as weak and have them lower their guard instead."

For the son of a nobleman, it was a given that being promoted would be their number one priority. Not to mention that being outranked by someone one's junior and having to take orders from them as a result would be undignified beyond measure.

Perhaps the real reason Ouzos still had no interest in moving up the ranks was that he was a commoner...?

In any case, I felt like I now understood much better why Ouzos refused to seek promotion within the guild. It was because he simply did not have even a shred of interest in rank, honor, or what people thought about him. That was also why no matter how many times I called him lazy, he never flew into a rage.

"Well... I hear you and understand your circumstances. But I know that one day, you'll meet someone who understands and values your abilities. You would do well to keep that in mind," I told him.

Even if he didn't have the tiniest bit of interest in rank, honor, or what people thought of him, anyone who had seen his true abilities on the battlefield with their own eyes would think of him quite differently. Hostiles would fear his prowess, and allies would find him dependable, just as I did.

"Also, I'd just like to repeat this one last time: Thank you for rescuing me, Mr. Ouzos."

After thanking him one last time, I bowed my head to *him*.

"Ah, no, no. Think nothing of it," he replied, seeming flustered. He then quickly gulped down the rest of his coffee and excused himself before hurrying out of the café.

"We may have concluded our business, but since he was here that long, don't you think he should have just stayed a little longer and enjoyed his coffee?" I complained without thinking, after having watched him speed out of the café.

“Mr. Ouzos seemed quite uncomfortable, so let us be lenient with him,” said Shelley magnanimously.

She was right—it really had seemed like this trendy café wasn’t his kind of place.

“Well, we’ve concluded our business here, so perhaps we’d better be getting home as well.”

I gulped down my own coffee, which had long since gone cold, before exiting the café myself.

I stopped at the guild first, but after that, I stepped into my limousine and headed home—or at least to the home I kept on Planet Ittsu.

On our way there, Shelley suddenly asked, “Although that might have been awkward, milady, weren’t you lucky that it was Mr. Ouzos who rescued you?”

“You requested his help directly, didn’t you?” I asked.

Ouzos had mentioned that when we had spoken just a short while ago, and Shelley herself had said as much too.

“If we’d chosen your savior poorly, it might have been someone who would have leveraged that debt to make senseless demands.”

Shelley saying that reminded me of something that had happened when I was still a student.

One time, at school, I had slipped on some stairs and nearly fell, but one of my male classmates had saved me from falling.

No sooner had I thanked him than he’d said, “I saved your life, so starting today, you’ll be my woman! My father is a count, you know!”

If not for the reforms of our previous and present imperial rulers, things might have turned out exactly like he’d said.

“You’re right,” I said, answering Shelley’s comment. “I’m glad he was the one who saved me.”

Looking out the car window, I reflected that the next time I saw Ouzos, I would have to apologize for the times I had called him lazy or a coward. I told

myself that I mustn't get nervous when the time came, like I had today.

But when I see him next time...how am I supposed to strike up a conversation with him?!



Another Aside: UNKNOWN

At an undisclosed location...

"I'm terribly sorry!"

A voice echoed throughout the vast, open space. It sounded young and was tinged with frustration.

"You don't need to apologize. You succeeded in getting in that light-brown vessel's way."

A deeper voice had joined the younger one, praising the latter's accomplishments.

"But the vessel you so generously provided was damaged..."

"Vessels are disposable in the first place. The important thing is that the pilot comes back alive."

The owner of the deep voice picked up a nearby glass of liquor and took a gulp of the amber liquid inside it.

"However, between the Winged Helmet and that light-brown vessel, we still have many formidable opponents. And although she may have lost to you, the pilot of the vessel with the leopard emblem also proved very capable."

The deep-voiced speaker smiled like a beast toying with its prey.

"Elder brother. That light-brown vessel was referred to as 'Khaki' by Baroness Glient's elite forces," said yet another voice in the room.

"'Khaki,' you say. He certainly eluded you with his proton torpedoes, almost like kicking dust in your eyes!"

"Grr..." Having had his failure pointed out, the younger voice let out a groan of indignation.

“It is, however, a pity that we failed to capture the pilot of the vessel with the leopard emblem,” noted the deep-voiced individual’s younger brother.

“Once again, it was Khaki who stood in my way...” said the younger voice ruefully, straining to get the words out.

Seeing the younger speaker’s consternation, the deeper voice remonstrated with him. “I know you want revenge for your humiliation, but our objective was the downfall of Baroness Elizalia Glient. Having achieved that, we will establish greater amity between ourselves and House Rosello. Beyond that, our objective is simply to expand our influence. Anyway, you lost because of your own inexperience and the fact that your opponent had superior abilities. Do not resent him—think of him as your teacher and devote your efforts to bettering yourself.”

Upon being spoken to by the owner of the deep voice, the owner of the younger voice stood at attention.

“Yes, sir!”

Special Story: My Mistress



Aside: Shelley

After my creation at the hands of my manufacturer and having undergone a number of checks to confirm my operations and performance, I was immediately placed inside a storage capsule and my functions were suspended.

The next time I was activated, the first sight I saw was two young people, a man and a woman. Those two were the parents of my current mistress, Fialka—Viscount Tielsad and his wife.

When they found me, I was sitting in my capsule in a warehouse inside a ruined complex. They explained to me that such a long time had passed since my creation that the ones who had made me had long since reached the end of their lives.

The ones who had found me were the heads of House Tielsad, a family who managed a very large company but were considered to be living modest lives compared to other nobles. They had very few servants in their manor, but because of the programs for domestic work, child-rearing, and VIP protection that were still present in my memory banks, it was decided that I would join the ranks of the servants at Tielsad Manor.

By the time a year had passed since I had entered service at the manor, I was adored by the lord and lady of the house, as well as the other servants.

When the lady of the house became pregnant, it was decided that I would be the personal maid of the child who was going to be born. I was told that the servants working in Tielsad Manor at that time—Soydy the butler, as well as the handmaids Karona and Martha—were all elderly, and as a result, would not be able to keep up with a growing child’s stamina. I was also told that the two younger handmaids and the underbutler—Eifil, Liliene, and Zak, respectively—

weren't able to care for an infant either.

When Lady Alishia's due date finally came, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl. At the time, her husband Lord Olbart was so elated and made such a fuss that he was scolded harshly by the hospital nurses. Even today, his wife will tease him about it and they still laugh.

When I was given my newborn mistress to hold for the first time, the instant I saw her face, I knew that she was the one I was truly meant to serve.

I didn't know why that was.

But from that moment on, I have always been my mistress's maid.

After I had been entrusted with my young mistress's care, around the time she was taking her first steps and beginning to speak, the lord and lady of the house gathered all the servants around. The lord then gave us the following instructions:

"From this day on, if my daughter should ever misbehave or say something unspeakably selfish, I want you to scold her without reservation. Depending on the severity of her transgressions, I don't mind if you see fit to strike her with an open palm or even your knuckles. Though, of course, I'd rather you leave the knuckles until she has grown up a little more."

The lord's words had shocked all of the servants, including me.

The thirty-seventh ruler of the Galactic Empire—Emperor Rubanows Eidel Orvorus—had issued a set of decrees known as the Imperial Territory Reforms. As a result of these decrees, the aristocracy had seen their privileges diminished and they would be duly prosecuted if they committed any crimes.

However, the aristocracy's way of thinking would not change overnight, and we could all anticipate that we would not get off lightly if we were to ever scold or strike a noble, even if she was just a child.

"I can understand your hesitation," the lady of the house began, "but in order for my daughter to become an upstanding person, she requires discipline. Alternatively, we could let her misbehave without scolding her and see that her every selfish wish is granted, but if we let her go through life like that, she will

never grow up to be a righteous person. If you truly love my daughter, you will respect our wishes.”

Despite our initial shock, after hearing what our lady had to say, we servants all decided to follow their instructions.

In the end, after growing up receiving love and discipline from everyone who lived at Tielsad Manor, my mistress could still be a bit strong-willed at times. But even so, whenever she wanted something from me, her parents, or one of the other servants, she was sure to ask politely.

“Shelley. I want to eat pancakes, so I’d like you to make some. Please?”

And when I granted her requests, her face always lit up as she thanked me.

“They look yummy! Thank you, Shelley!”

She really was growing up to be a lovely child.

I still remember the most selfish demand my mistress ever made of me. It happened back when she was in her first year of elementary school.

One of her classmates, the daughter of a count, had caught sight of me once when I had come to pick up my mistress. She had sought to use her father’s authority to take me away from my mistress.

That little girl had said, “If you don’t come be my maid instead, I’ll use my father’s authority to crush the house you work for now.”

The decrees in the Imperial Territory Reforms had not yet had time to completely sink in, so cases like this had still been common.

I really hadn’t wanted to leave my mistress’s service. However, having known that I risked bringing trouble to the door of House Tielsad by staying, I had told my lord and lady that I intended to go to serve the count’s family instead.

While I had been discussing this with them, my young mistress ran up to me and wrote “Fialka” on the back of my left hand with a pen.

“Shelley is mine! See, my name is on her! I don’t want her to go away! I won’t hand her over! I don’t care if we lose our house!”

With tears in her eyes, she had said those selfish things and threw her arms around me. If I had been designed to shed tears, I'm sure I would have sobbed myself.

Seeing this unfold, my lord had then contacted the count to refuse his demands, but this had apparently been the first the count had heard of it. He had summoned his daughter, asked her what had happened, then gave her quite the talking-to.

Apparently, the count's daughter had very strict teachers and training regimens. When she had seen how kindly I seemed to treat my mistress, she'd thought that I might be able to protect her. That had been why she'd threatened my family to try and obtain me.

After apologizing to us himself, the count had then forced his daughter to apologize to us as well.

However, the very next day when I had gone to school to pick up my mistress, I saw that her cheeks were swollen.

According to her, she had gotten into another fight with the count's daughter. In a display unbecoming of two young ladies, they had proceeded to slap one another in the face. Both of them had ended up getting a stern lecture from their teacher.

Incidentally, we still saw this count's daughter—Lady Myca Fienidas—from time to time.

As for my mistress's name on the back of my left hand, it had remained there until just before she entered middle school. She had begged desperately for me to remove it at that time, so I did just that.

I was truly reluctant to do so, however.

Afterword

As there are so many books available, thank you so much for choosing this one.

It's nice to meet you. I'm Toryuu.

When I heard that this work, *The Dorky NPC Mercenary Knows His Place*, had received an award and was about to be published, I have to admit that I thought I was being pranked somehow.

I originally began this work to take a break from a fantasy story I was writing at the time. My first idea was that it was the title of a light novel the protagonist of *that* story was reading, so I only started writing it to provide context for the conversations that protagonist would have with other characters about it.

Something about this story seemed to resonate with readers, which surprised me, so I started writing it in earnest. I watched it climb the site rankings, receive an award, and eventually be selected to be published in book form.

This is entirely thanks to everyone who read the story back when it was just being serialized on the internet as well as everyone in Overlap's editing department who selected it for their award and decided to put it in print. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

This work was conceived to be the exact opposite of every story where the protagonist is handsome, has abilities an order of magnitude beyond everyone else around him, enjoys a meteoric rise in social standing, and unconsciously attracts a harem of girls who fall in love with him thanks to his affable personality.

In order to achieve that, I had to go with a main character who would just be like anyone else in the background in the aforementioned story about a protagonist's exploits. This character would only appear as a point of comparison to make a protagonist look that much more amazing. Just the

thought of people liking a story about a character in that kind of position really pleases me.

For the print version of this story, there's a new character who didn't exist in the web version. Her addition has made the protagonist's (meaning the NPC's) surroundings just a bit more vibrant. Nothing about our protagonist's (NPC's) actions has changed, however. I am extremely interested to see how my readers react to this addition.

Apart from that, my sci-fi knowledge is an amalgamation of past works in the genre as well as a whole lot of secondhand info gleaned opportunistically from "Search Engine-sensei." My approach was a bit loose, but I would be grateful if you could overlook that.

For the print version, Hamu was kind enough to provide character illustrations. Each one was splendid and completely matched the image of each character I had in my head. I cannot overstate my gratitude.

And to my cover designer, you produced something I never could have dreamed up by myself. I thank you profusely for that.

But my greatest thanks are reserved for my proofreader. I tend to write purely based on momentum, so I often make a lot of mistakes and I know I caused you a great deal of trouble. I have nothing but words of thanks for you. In the future, I'd like to endeavor to make fewer typos.

What kind of missions will our protagonist (NPC) take on in the future? How will he deal with the circumstances he'll find himself in?

We all hope you will join us in finding out.

—Toryuu











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The Dorky NPC Mercenary Knows His Place: Volume 1

by Toryuu

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