



I'M THE HEROIC KNIGHT OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPIRE

NOVEL

2

► WRITTEN BY
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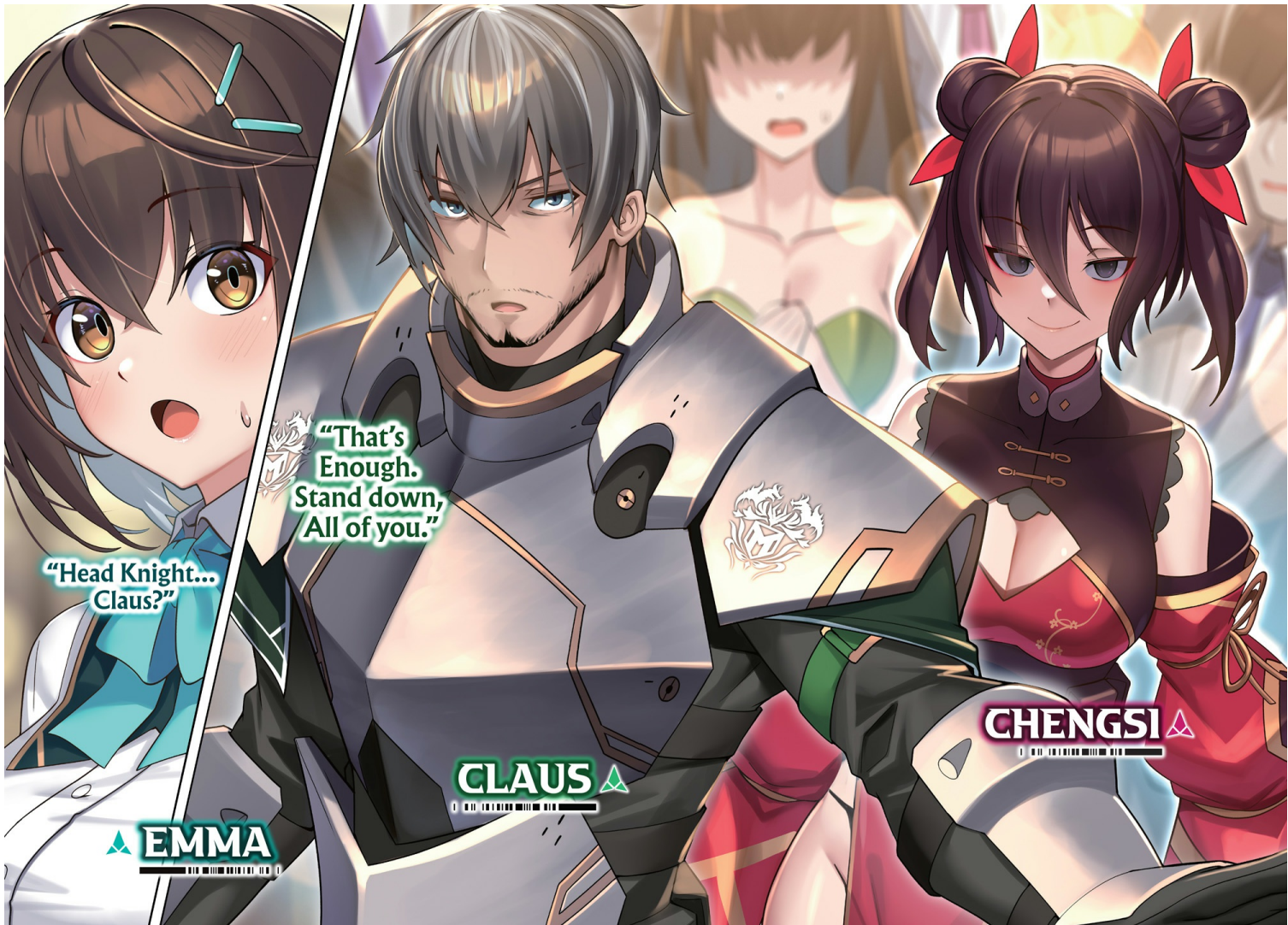
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“Knights are just pawns. They’re disposable lives for the nobles who wield them.”

AG007-M921G [M]
GOLD RACCOON

SIRENA

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

A LONE GIRL STOOD IN A MEADOW, a pleasant breeze blowing through the grass at her feet and a brilliant blue sky expanding above her head. The sun blazed in the sky, but it wasn't hot. If anything, it was cool.

The girl wore a white dress and straw sun hat. She held the latter firmly with one hand so it didn't blow away. Her other hand carried a picnic basket.

"Huh? What am I...?"

The girl glanced around, unable to remember what she'd been about to do. She was struck by a sudden loneliness—then spotted a young man approaching. He was dressed casually in a white shirt and black slacks. His face was blurry, although the girl could at least tell that he had black hair somewhere between long and short.

Despite the young man's blurred face, the girl waved when she saw him and ran over. She couldn't believe it herself, but she knew this man—moreover, they had a rather intimate relationship.

"You're late! I was waiting for you, you know," the man chided. He took the basket from the girl, and they walked together arm in arm. Although she couldn't see his face well, she knew that he was smiling.

"Hey, are we going somewhere?" she asked, clinging to his arm. "Or having lunch first?"

Grinning at her gluttonous question, he used the hand holding the basket to point at a tree in the field. It was still a young tree, thin and flimsy. Despite that, its leaves were vibrant green.

"Want to head over there?" she inquired.

The man nodded.

She smiled ear to ear. "Okay! So do I! Let's get going!"

The pair set out for the tree, and when the girl looked up at the man's face...

A long line of tilted, liquid-filled capsules sat in the dim room. There were hundreds of capsules, and the faint glow of the liquid inside was the only illumination.

Figures in white lab coats walked down the path between the capsules, each of which contained a nude woman. The figures in lab coats checked the women's condition as they passed by.

One figure checked her wrist terminal. When she saw the time, she nodded and exchanged a look with the other figures, who nodded back. She fed a command into her terminal, and the ceiling lights came on, instantly brightening the room.

"Beginning awakening procedures," the woman said.

The other figures rushed to their stations.

"We'll start with pods one to thirty."

"Pods thirty-one and on will awaken twenty minutes from now."

As the figures moved busily in the chamber, the girl in one capsule awoke. She was a bit groggy as she came to, and the viscous green liquid surrounding her offered resistance when she tried to move.

The girl—Lieutenant Emma Rodman—moved her hands, watching her brown hair sway in the liquid in her peripheral vision. She clenched and unclenched her fists a few times as her current state became clear to her.

Oh, that's right... I'm in an education capsule. I feel like I was having a really good dream too. She'd been dreaming of a date with a young man she couldn't identify. Not like I've ever gone out with a boy in real life.

As she remembered where she was, the fluid inside the capsule discharged. The capsule tilted upright, and its clear hatch opened.

Emma stepped out, her body a little heavy, toward the women in white lab coats who waited beside the capsule. They were medically trained technicians who monitored the education capsules.

The women smiled at Emma. “This concludes your short-term education session. It was only a week long, so you won’t require physical therapy, but you may feel a little sluggish for a few days.”

Emma accepted a robe from the women. She put her arms through the sleeves, still not fully awake. “Thank you.”

Damp, she stumbled through the room, watching capsules open one after another. She knew most of the people emerging—they were her crewmates from the light carrier Melea.

Emma watched, dazed, as a naked woman crawled from the capsule next to hers and promptly collapsed to the floor. It was Private First Class Molly Burrell from Emma’s squadron. Her reddish-brown hair, usually tied in pigtails, spread out beside her, and her large breasts were completely exposed. The viscous liquid that had filled the capsule almost made her look as though she was covered in lotion.

“Molly?!” Emma propped her friend up worriedly. A moment later, women in lab coats swarmed around Molly to check her vitals. “Are you all right?!”

“Hmm...?” Molly’s eyes blinked open. When they focused on Emma, they filled with tears. “Emma...I-I...”

“What is it?! Did something go wrong?! H-hurry and let the doctors look at you!”

Emma was flustered, but Molly just clutched her naked stomach.

“I’m so *hungry*...” she whined.

A second later, Emma’s stomach—which was also empty—growled as well.

The gathered technicians sighed, exasperated. “If all you feel is hungry, that’s a sign you’re healthy,” they said with wry smiles, comforting the two girls. “You

just woke up, so for now, you should eat something easy on the stomach.”

The technicians wrapped Molly in a robe, then went to check on other capsules. Once Emma had helped her stand, Molly put her arms through the sleeves of the robe.

“I don’t really like education capsules,” she grumbled.

Emma smiled awkwardly. “I get that. You’re defenseless while you’re sleeping. Plus, you kind of worry that they’re filling your head with weird stuff, right?”

Education capsules were a marvel of technology. All the person inside had to do was sleep, and their head filled with knowledge. The capsules could even strengthen a person’s body. They were indispensable innovations in this world.

Still, people had misgivings about using them. The individual inside was defenseless, so if someone with ill intent infiltrated a facility, the capsule occupants would be at their mercy.

A passing technician heard the two girls’ comments. “No need to worry,” she interrupted brashly. “I don’t know about other places, but here in House Banfield’s domain, we monitor capsules constantly. And AIs surveil them by camera twenty-four seven.”

It was apparently policy to respond to such concerns confidently, so as not to worry the people using the capsules. Having done so, the technician returned to her work.

Molly didn’t seem convinced. “Even knowing all that, they’re hard to embrace,” she said frankly.

All Emma could do was smile awkwardly. “If it really bothers you, you could check the security footage,” she suggested.

“I don’t want to bother. Let’s just wash up. This sticky stuff all over me feels gross, and I’m hungry.”

“Yeah.”

The two left to clean off.

The facility housing the education capsules was structured like a large hospital. Those using the capsules wore hospital gowns and, after finishing their sessions, spent several more days in the facility before being discharged.

There was an on-site cafeteria, but it only served food that was easy to digest. After finishing her own meal, Emma watched Molly eat something like rice porridge with a distinct lack of satisfaction.

She checked her terminal. “Our next mission’s at... Yes, the Seventh Weapons Factory.”

Warrant Officer Larry Cramer, a pilot in Emma’s Third Platoon, sat next to her. He was a slender man with long bangs that hid one eye. He didn’t look like he was enjoying his porridge one bit either, and he was the one to respond to Emma’s comment. “We just got out of those capsules. They’re sending us on our next mission already? Is there any *reason* we have to go all the way to a weapons factory?”

Thanks to her studies at the knight academy, Emma had a response ready for his sardonic grumbling. “Yes. The Seventh Weapons Factory supplies House Banfield with most of its armaments,” she explained. “So we have to give them a heads-up if we overhaul or upgrade our weaponry.”

Larry didn’t seem particularly interested in this subject, but when Molly heard they were heading to the Seventh, she looked riveted.

“I can’t wait to see their new models,” she said. “Although I’m kind of with Larry—I don’t really see the point of *us* going there.”

What *was* the point of visiting in person to obtain new armaments? Emma tried to explain, but floundered. “Hold on a sec. I feel like I learned this at the knight academy. Huh...? Wait a minute... I can’t remember.”

As Emma racked her brain, Molly and Larry gave her exasperated grins. Even if

knowledge was drilled into you in an education capsule, it would fade with time if you didn't make use of it. As Emma noted the value of daily practice, an answer came from an unexpected place.

"Delivering the stuff's a pain, so we go pick up the equipment ourselves." Another Third Platoon member, Warrant Officer Doug Walsh, sat down with his tray. Walsh had short hair and a beard. He appeared middle-aged and had been in the military for ages. His long career meant he had the knowledge Emma had forgotten—or, at least, his own spin on things. "If we can train with new equipment right after we receive it, it's easier, right? And to the nobles running this place, we're nothing more than fleet components they can move however they like."

"Oh, so that's how it is." Molly nodded vigorously at Doug's cynicism. "Okay, I get it now."

Larry, however, looked upset to hear that they were being treated as *components*. "It really sucks, doesn't it?"

Standing, Emma hurriedly denied the explanation the other two had so readily accepted. "That's not it! That's *definitely* not it!"

She objected partly because she didn't want her squadron mates to think the military simply treated them like pawns. However, she'd also balked because serving in House Banfield's military was the first step toward her dream to become a hero of justice. She had a fierce admiration for the ruler of their domain. Count Banfield, the lord they served, was the very reason Emma wanted to become an upstanding knight. Hearing Doug's claim that her role model treated his soldiers like nothing more than spare parts, she couldn't stay silent.

Larry pointed his spoon at her, his face exasperated. "I don't know. There're hundreds of millions of people in our military. I doubt the people up top think of us as anything more than numbers."

Emma opened her mouth to refute that, but Doug cut in, scratching his head

in annoyance. “Look, let’s change the subject, kid. I’ll say I’m sorry, and we can move on and talk about something more fun. Okay?”

“I’m not a kid! I’m your commander! Your *commander*! You’ve all forgotten that I’m your superior officer, haven’t you?!” Emma huffed. None of her subordinates showed her a bit of respect.

Doug ignored her question. “Message for you, then, Commander.” He pulled up a list of ships headed for the Seventh Weapons Factory on his watch-type - terminal, displaying it to the group. The four peered at the same screen.

The number of spacecraft on the list surprised Molly. “Three thousand ships? Won’t that many be a hassle for the Seventh?”

Larry nodded to himself as if he’d just remembered something. “Aren’t those the ships the military bought up after the reforms? A lot of them are nearing the end of their expected service life. They probably intend to fix ‘em up or trade in some of their parts.”

The light carrier Melea was among the ships heading to the Seventh, and next to its name on the list were the words “upgrade planned.” They stood out among the other entries, which were mostly marked “overhaul” or “trade-in.”

As usual, Doug had a pessimistic view of the situation. “Our mothership’s way past her expected service life, but the higher-ups just want to fix ‘er up and keep usin’ her. They’re indifferent as always to the place where they send everyone they don’t want anymore.”

The Melea belonged to the border region security force, which was where people demoted by House Banfield’s military were sent. Seeing the other three’s dissatisfaction with their treatment, Emma couldn’t really keep arguing.

It’s true that it wouldn’t surprise me if they disposed of the Melea any day now.

The ship was already centuries old. It now operated in poor conditions at all times, so it had several outstanding maintenance issues. It didn’t perform well

either, since it was several generations behind the current tech. If the Melea had a saving grace, it was its relative sturdiness, and that was all.

Since the four were now rather dejected, Doug switched the screen to display something else, changing the topic. "This Claus guy's taking charge of all our forces for the time being."

Larry furrowed his brow. "'Course they've got to ignore rank and put a knight in charge," he muttered.

Emma didn't miss the disdain in his voice. Larry had a powerful hatred of knights. Knowing that nothing she said would change his mind, she looked at the file Doug had displayed for them.

His knight rank is B, and his military rank is lieutenant colonel... I've never heard of him before, though. Lieutenant Colonel Claus Sera Mont, huh?

As Emma gazed at the unknown knight's name, Larry added, "I've never even heard of this guy. And he's only a lieutenant colonel. Don't you think that's too low a rank to command a fleet this size?"

It was a rather large fleet for an unproven knight. "Maybe he's got friends in high places," Molly suggested. "Or maybe anyone would do. We're just going to the Seventh and coming back."

Doug, who clearly wasn't very interested in the topic, agreed with Molly right away. "We don't have enough knights to spare here, and he's probably the best they've got." When he mentioned the domain's dearth of knights, he glanced Emma's way for a second.

Emma noticed and turned away in a huff, but she couldn't say anything in response. After all, she was aware that she was lacking in all kinds of areas. She looked back at Claus's name. *Lieutenant Colonel Claus Sera Mont, huh? I wonder what kind of person he is.*

In a certain region of space, asteroids floated alongside the wreckage of

battleships and mobile knights.

Sparks flew from one knight's damaged parts as their head jerked around to face the individual trying to kill them. *"Filthy mercenaries..."* The damaged unit was a border region garrison from the Union Army doing routine security patrols in the area.

In her mobile knight's cockpit, the enemy pilot smiled coldly. "I'll take that as a compliment."

She immediately jerked the control stick in her right hand, and the sword in her mobile knight's grip pierced her adversary's cockpit.

The enemy pilot removed her helmet, revealing shiny white hair that floated in the zero-gravity cockpit. Her skin was pale and smooth, and it was clear that she had a great figure, even through her pilot suit. She was dazzlingly beautiful—but her eyes were dark. Those lightless green eyes gazed at the mobile knight she'd just destroyed, emotionless.

"If you'd just surrendered, I would've spared you," she murmured haughtily as her allies gathered around her. The dahlia-like marks on their mobile knights' left shoulders represented the name of their outfit, which belonged to a large mercenary alliance called Vulture. This woman commanded a force particularly high up in that alliance.

Cheerful voices came from the other mobile knights.

"We're done too, Commander Sirena."

"It's such a pain that the Union Army doesn't negotiate."

"Yeah. You can flash small change at the Empire, and they'll pretend they didn't even see you."

Although they'd just been fighting, they sounded completely carefree. Normally, a commander would probably have told them to shape up, but Sirena said no such thing to her subordinates. If anything, she enjoyed the tone her companions set.

“I’m glad it seems like you’re all safe. We really shouldn’t have taken a job guarding pirates, though... The pay wasn’t bad, but I’d have charged extra if I’d known we’d tangle with the Union Army.”

Sirena’s Dahlia Mercenaries had agreed to protect pirates operating in Union territory, transporting goods that were contraband in the Union. In other words, the pirates were smugglers, and Dahlia was their escort.

“We’ll be done with this job soon. Should we go to war next?” one of Sirena’s subordinates asked. *“I want to earn more money!”* She must also have wanted to make a name for herself on a larger battlefield.

“I’ve already picked our next job,” Sirena answered icily. As the mobile knights headed from the battlefield back to their mothership, she told them what it was. “We’ll attack the Empire’s Seventh Weapons Factory.”

When they heard that, her subordinates were speechless. Almost half a minute went by before one asked, *“Are you serious?”* They didn’t seem confident about attacking one of the Empire’s weapons factories.

Sirena shrugged. “We’ve been hired to procure or destroy a craft they’re developing,” she explained. “Once we’ve done that, we can get out of there right away.”

“Well, I suppose that sounds doable... Why do they want us to do something so annoying, though?”

“There’s no need to know their reasons. They’re offering so much money, I don’t even care why.” Sirena had already accepted a significant sum as an advance for the job.

I wonder what’s so special about that craft. She checked its data on her monitor. “A new Nemain, eh?” she muttered. “The craft’s name is...the Atalanta.”

The data on the Atalanta included a photo of a young female knight who must’ve been the craft’s pilot. Sirena flicked the picture with her finger.

“What an unlucky girl, to be in our crosshairs.”

Chapter 1:

Asteroid Neia

THE SEVENTH WEAPONS FACTORY, one of the facilities supporting the Algrand Empire's military strength, was based out of a group of asteroids floating in space. The ugly amalgamation of mined asteroids also functioned as a colony people could live inside. A number of factory employees resided there, and it was more comfortable than many similar space colonies.

Emma's workplace, the light carrier Melea, was arriving at Asteroid Neia. They were guided inside the facility alongside a fleet arriving from House Banfield's domain.

A cheerful voice from the control room welcomed them. *"Welcome, Melea crew. Thank you sincerely for bringing her back!"*

Personnel at the Seventh had checked the Melea's records and confirmed that the factory had constructed the light carrier, so they considered this its home.

In the hangar, preparing for port entry, Emma said thoughtfully, "I suppose this *is* something of a homecoming for the Melea."

She poked her head from the cockpit of the Atalanta, her personal prototype craft. She was wearing work coveralls, but their top half was pulled down, revealing a white tank top underneath. The shape of her breasts stood out clearly beneath the thin fabric, but neither she nor anyone around her was particularly bothered by that, being well-disciplined soldiers.

Molly stood beside Emma, fiddling with a tablet. "The Seventh prides itself on its technological prowess, after all. I bet they think it's all 'cause of them that such an old model made it back in one piece."

"I *have* heard something about that, now that you mention it. This factory is number one in the Empire in terms of tech, but..." Emma stopped herself there.

“But they’re crap at everything else,” Molly finished for her. “Their technological prowess really is impressive, but their sales fall short of other weapons factories. I guess that’s their weakness.”

That matched what Emma had heard about the Seventh’s products: they performed well, but there were problems in every other area. Many of the factory’s creations completely ignored usability in favor of performance and ease of maintenance. As a result, they were one of the Empire’s less popular weapons factories.

Emma smiled awkwardly. “House Banfield seems to use them a lot despite that, though.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t say I dislike them either. Still, I think I’m more a fan of the Third. Their stuff looks nice *and* performs well. Good cost performance, too.”

The engineers maintaining the Atalanta listened to the pair’s conversation. It wasn’t House Banfield’s military uniform these engineers wore; their coveralls were deep blue—a different color from Emma’s and Molly’s—and emblazoned with the word “Third.”

Among them was Engineering Major Percy Pae, chief of the development team Tarante. She had a brainy look; she wore red spectacles and had her hair tied behind her neck. She was also the only person dressed in clothes rather than coveralls, a tight skirt and white lab coat, which made her position obvious. Percy was tall and had a good figure, though her chest wasn’t big. Her ears stood out most. They were long and pointed—proof that she was an elf.

Percy joined Emma and Molly’s conversation with a grin. “I’m honored to hear you say that.”

“Oh! Major Pae!”

At the engineering major’s arrival, Emma and Molly hastily saluted.



Percy waved her hand, telling them to drop the gesture. “At ease, at ease. I told you I don’t care about all that, didn’t I? I’m more a developer than a soldier anyway. I do maintenance and upgrades; it’s really just a technicality that I’m part of the army.”

While Percy went on about how she wasn’t really a soldier, Emma and Molly could only give her awkward looks. To them, Percy belonged to the Empire’s army.

Emma wasn’t quite sure what to say to her. “Er...but you *are* an officer in the regular army, aren’t you?”

Molly cocked her head. “That means you rank higher than us, since we’re in a private army.”

At their reactions, Percy put a hand to her forehead, exasperated. “Weapons factories are partly owned by the government, but they’re more military *support* than military. Anyway, I only attended the military academy because it’d get me a better job after graduating.” The academy, she explained, was only a stepping stone on her way to becoming a scientist.

Molly looked surprised. “Is that legal?”

“Of course. It just means you can only be hired by weapons factories. I’ve heard that big-name munitions factories scout some people, but...”

As they spoke, the Melea docked inside the Seventh, and a mechanical arm fixed the ship in place. The zero-gravity dock was basically a hexagonal shaft; ships were fixed to each side.

Percy wrapped up her speech and sighed, thinking about what was to come. “Looks like we’ve arrived.” She turned to her subordinates and ordered, “Everyone keep an eye on the Atalanta so those performance-obsessed idiots at the Seventh don’t get anywhere near her.”

After Percy walked away, Emma peered up at the Atalanta. “A special team just for you, eh?”

The Atalanta was a Nemain specially modified by the Third Weapons Factory. No one other than Emma had been able to pilot it thus far, and that lack of usability meant it'd been in storage at the Third. Thanks to Emma's exceptional piloting, however, it was seeing the light of day now.

The Third Weapons Factory had approached House Banfield about a joint development project oriented around the Atalanta, but they weren't focused on completing the craft itself. More than anything, they wanted data. That was why they sent the mobile knight's developer, Percy, and her team.

A few minutes after the Melea docked, the hangar hatch opened, and some Seventh Weapons Factory personnel appeared.

Molly was excited to see them. "Looks like they're here to check things out already!"

The Seventh staff looked around eagerly, holding all kinds of measuring devices. They must've heard about the Atalanta.

"Hey there, Melea crew," a man piped up on their behalf. "Oh! I see some folks from the Third are here too."

Percy and her dev team glowered territorially. "You have no shame at all, do you?" demanded Percy. "This is why I hate dwarves." The Seventh representative who'd greeted them was a dwarf.

He shook his head. "What are the Third thinking, putting a stuck-up elf in charge?"

Percy's face reddened with anger. "That's racist! I swear, you Seventh employees are so uncivilized!"

"You were the one looking down your nose at dwarves. I noticed that look you gave me as soon as you saw me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Emma sighed as the two engineers glared daggers at one another. "Are they going to be able to bear each other?" As she watched their tiff, her terminal

received a message.

While she read it, Molly glanced over. “What’s up, Emma? We got a job to do or something?”

Emma shook her head; this evidently wasn’t a job for the platoon. “Looks like it’s just me. I guess they’re getting all the knights together. Sorry—I’ve got to go!”

Molly waved as she trotted off. “Guess we’ve all got stuff to deal with. Don’t know what they need, but do your best!”

“I will!”

There was a city on Asteroid Neia. In keeping with the Seventh Weapons Factory’s sensibilities, its design was rather practical. There was no wasted space in the municipal layout, which was laudable; still, it lacked whimsicality somewhat.

Emma looked over the city displayed on a large wall that functioned as a screen. She was attending a welcome party thrown in honor of the knights dispatched here from House Banfield. The Seventh Weapons Factory was responsible for the buffet-style event. Emma saw other House Banfield knights in the venue, though this event was only one of several. Additional venues had been prepared for the commanders and officers, who had their own parties.

“I guess weapons factories have money, huh?” Emma murmured. Holding a glass of punch, she watched the images on the screen shift.

Throughout the hall, coworkers and friends chatted as they mingled. Sadly, only one knight served aboard the Melea. Emma didn’t see anyone she’d gone to school with either, so she was on her own. Although a knight spoke to her once in a while, most hit on her.

“Hey, are you free after this?” asked a tall knight with a rather attractive face. The insignia on her uniform marked her as a captain, and her knight rank was...

A. She was undeniably an ace fighter—a cut above the B-rank Emma.

The good-looking, short-haired captain's inquiry flustered Emma. "I-I have to work!"

"Too bad."

Since the captain backed off right away, Emma realized she wasn't serious. "You're teasing me, aren't you?" she asked, frowning.

The other knight shrugged. "I just don't like being pushy, that's all. Still, I'm hurt. If you'd taken me up on my invitation, I would've kept you company until morning."

"Huh...?" The captain hadn't been insistent, so Emma had assumed her flirting was frivolous—that it was just a greeting of sorts. It seemed she *had* been serious, however. Emma was relieved that she hadn't played along with the invitation as a joke.

The captain, meanwhile, wasn't bothered by her rejection. She moved right on to small talk instead. "You new? Pretty impressive to be ranked B already."

The captain seemed to have a genuine interest in her. Emma wasn't quite sure how to answer, but she decided she didn't have anything to hide, so she told the truth. "That was just a fluke. I took part in a big mission and happened to make a difference."

Sensing Emma's insecurity, the captain smiled awkwardly. "Just surviving a big mission is impressive enough, you know. You should have more confidence. In fact, you're kind of an interesting girl. Want to join my squad? We'll welcome you with open arms."

"Er, I..." She couldn't let another squad scout her while she was serving as the Atalanta's test pilot. Before Emma could turn the captain down, though, a fight broke out at the party.

"Say that again!"

Turning toward the commotion, Emma and the captain saw two groups of

about a dozen knights facing off. They glared at each other, and the atmosphere suggested that they might draw their weapons at any moment.

The knights in the other group just couldn't remain quiet. "I said you useless idiots who lost to pirates don't deserve new units!" one cried. "We'll take the Teumessas. You losers pilot Moheives or something!"

They were seemingly arguing about the new craft the Seventh Weapons Factory would supply them.

Seeing this, the captain sighed in exasperation. "I can't believe they brought their little faction war all the way here," she grouched. She seemed to know more about the situation than Emma.

"Faction war?" Emma asked, mystified.

Knowing that Emma was a new knight, the captain must've figured she had no choice but to explain. "It seems like you don't know about this, but there are two House Banfield knights who are usually named as representative of the order."

Emma frowned. "I know *that* much. You mean Lady Christiana and Lady Marie, right?"

They'd been House Banfield's top two knights up until a short while ago, when they'd earned Liam's ire and been demoted. They remained in important positions regardless, however; House Banfield's personnel shortage was simply that bad.

Emma outlined what she knew about the pair—which was merely the impression the general public had—with a proud look. "They're both first-rate knights who loyally serve our lord."

In contrast to Emma's smile, the captain wore an expression that was hard to define. "Have you met either?"

"I've seen them a few times at ceremonies, but I haven't had a chance to meet them anywhere else." A common knight like Emma was unlikely to

encounter Christiana or Marie, let alone actually talk to them.

“I’ve only met them a handful of times myself, but they fight like cats and dogs.”

“They don’t get along?” Emma couldn’t hide her surprise.

The captain sipped her drink. “There’s a rumor they were stripped of their positions because they butted heads right in front of our lord. I haven’t been with the knights all that long, but in places like this, it’s not uncommon for people to fight over who’s on top. If you actually manage to win, you’ll probably *stay* on top for a few centuries, so...” She trailed off.

When Emma heard that the two people most emblematic of House Banfield’s knights were warring over the top spot, she more or less grasped what was happening at this party.

“Wait. So, are those groups fighting because...” She hoped she was wrong.

The captain affirmed what she was thinking with a grin. “You got it. They’re knights from Christiana’s and Marie’s factions. When they’re both around, they’re always at each other’s throats.”

“W-we have to stop them!” The two groups looked like they were about to kill each other. Learning that they were only at loggerheads over a difference in faction, Emma moved to intervene.

The captain caught her shoulder to stop her. “You don’t need to get involved. The commander’s about to show up.”

“Commander? You don’t mean the supreme commander *himself*?” He was here?

In response, the captain pointed, and Emma spotted a man approaching the quarreling knights.

“Yep. My boss. Everybody calls him ‘Busy Work Chief,’ but I respect him.”

The man was familiar to Emma. She gaped, muttering, “Head Knight...Claus?”

It was the lieutenant colonel who'd been temporarily appointed head knight in order to take charge of this mission. Beside him was a beautiful, slender woman with a vulpine face.

The captain, who apparently worked for Claus, boasted proudly about her superior officer. "He may just be the Busy Work Chief now, but I think Sir Claus has it in him to head the whole order."

House Banfield didn't currently have a First or Second Knight, and the order was perhaps small for a count's household, but the headcount of knights was still comparatively large. They numbered in the tens of thousands. Leading such an order, Claus would command thousands...or tens of thousands...of knights. And if House Banfield continued to expand, a high position among its knights could be equivalent to the First Knight role in other noble households.

When the captain saw the woman walking behind Claus, her expression clouded. "You have to be impressive to get someone like *that* to listen to you. I can't believe the commander can stand having the Bloody Devil next to him like that."

"Bloody Devil?"

"The Ally Killer."

The captain explained to the uninformed Emma that Chengsi Sera Tohrei was infamous among House Banfield's knights—a problem child who'd been part of several orders of knights and chased out of each and every one. She didn't distinguish between friend and foe on the battlefield, and was always covered in the blood of enemies and allies alike, which had earned her the dishonorable moniker "Bloody Devil."

Claus and Chengsi stepped in to stop the fight. Although Claus was calm, his voice carried throughout the venue. "That's enough. Stand down, all of you."

Several of the hostile knights raised their eyebrows in irritation, but when they saw Claus—and the sneering woman behind him—they took their hands off their weapons.

“This’s the head knight’s order. You got lucky today.”

“Speak for yourselves.”

The groups split up, grumbling to themselves. Sighs of relief went through the venue.

“Is it over?”

“Man, I was worried blood would start flying.”

“Looks like we’ll be able to rely on the head knight this time around.”

Everyone present seemed to approve more strongly of Claus after he’d stepped in to stop the fight. The captain was happy to observe that; she winked at Emma. “See? There was no need to get involved.”

All Emma could do was agree. “He’s pretty amazing.”

As they watched Claus, impressed, he noticed their gazes and turned toward them.

The captain waved. “Splendid as always, sir!”

Claus looked a bit exasperated, but his tone was gentle as he addressed his subordinate. “If you were watching, I wish you’d stepped in. So? Going to introduce me?”

Emma straightened up as Claus’s gaze fell on her.

Chapter 2: Mercenaries

“I’M CLAUS. I’ve been put in charge of this operation.”

“Lieutenant Emma Rodman, sir!” Emma saluted, nervous, but glad to have a chance to speak with Claus after he’d stopped the fight. Strangely, she wasn’t afraid of him.

He’s not as intimidating as the instructor was. Is he really that impressive...?

That rather rude thought was undoubtedly because Emma’s instructor had been the AA-rank Claudia. An AA-ranked knight was superhuman, but Claus was rank B, just like Emma. Still, he was almost definitely more skilled than she. In experience, he was leagues ahead. Yet she didn’t feel that his level was beyond her reach, like Claudia’s.

As for Claus, he gave Emma a calm smile. “Ah. The test pilot for the experimental craft.”

“You know me, sir?”

“As the man in charge, I have to be aware of everyone under me.” Saying that, Claus cemented himself in Emma’s mind as a diligent superior officer.

The captain beside her deflated. “I didn’t know you had a special mission. I guess I’ll have to give up on bringing you into my unit.”

Claus again gave the captain an exasperated look. “I thought I told you to stop trying to recruit members of other squads, Janet.”

The captain’s name was Janet Duffy. It was hard for Emma to believe she was listening to a conversation between a lieutenant colonel and a captain, but from how they interacted, it was clear that their squad got along well.

“I just want to power up our unit, Commander!” Janet teased Claus. “Can’t you see that your darling subordinate’s trying to lighten your load a little?”

“Then stop making me field those complaints I keep getting from other units.” Janet apparently made a habit of flirtatiously scouting other knights, and it was Claus who dealt with the objections afterward.

Janet put her hands together apologetically, still smiling. “I always appreciate it, sir!”

Giving up on chastising his unrepentant subordinate, Claus changed the subject. “We’ve got those new models to deal with, so don’t fool around too much. To use the new equipment, you’ll have to spend time in an education capsule and in training.”

“Yes, sir.”

To Emma, Janet had initially given off the air of a beautiful woman playing the part of a man. However, she revealed a feminine charm when she interacted with Claus. She must’ve been truly fond of him.

The “new models” Claus mentioned piqued Emma’s interest. She assumed he must be talking about mobile knights. “We’re getting new models from the Seventh? Wait—even our squadron?!”

Emma whipped her head around to gaze at the wall, which displayed the new “Teumessa” the Seventh had developed. It was a slim mobile knight with a head designed to look a bit like a fox’s. According to rumors Emma had heard, some House Banfield forces were already using Teumessas. Equipment upgrades *were* on the docket for this mission, so the knights all wondered whether they’d receive new mobile knights.

Emma’s eyes were positively sparkling with excitement, but Claus’s expression didn’t change. “Sorry, but that’ll depend on how many units the Seventh manufactured. I can’t say yet whether your squad will receive them.”

“I-I see.” She had the Atalanta, but she wanted new craft for Doug and Larry, her unit’s other pilots. The quality of the mobile knights they piloted would directly impact their survival in the field. *And, if they got new mobile knights, would they be a bit more motivated?*

As she pictured her subordinates' faces, Chengsi—who'd been quiet this whole time—walked up to her. She stuck her face right in front of Emma's, so close that their noses almost touched. Recalling Chengsi's gruesome nicknames, Emma started sweating bullets.

"Er, c-can I help you?" Trapped by the woman's dull, dark gaze, Emma froze in place. *I-I can't move?!*

All she could do was tremble, sweat dripping down her back. She palpably sensed the difference in their skill levels as knights, and she shivered instinctively in fear. The scariest thing was that Emma had no way of knowing just *how* strong Chengsi was. She was incapable even of judging that.

Was she going to be killed? Her pulse quickened with fear until Claus stepped in to save her. "Chengsi, step away from Lieutenant Rodman." He must've sensed the same danger Emma had.

Janet moved as well, though her expression was rather strained. "I'd appreciate your not making a scene in a place like this, ma'am."

Even an A-rank knight feared Chengsi. That meant Chengsi surpassed A-rank strength.

Emma couldn't stop trembling, imaginary scenes of her own death springing into her mind one after another. "Ah...ah..."

Chengsi had looked at her with interest at first, but when she saw how frightened Emma was, she stepped back with a disappointed look. She put a hand on her hip and sighed in a fluid, elegant manner. "I guess I was wrong about you... You're boring."

Chengsi turned her back and walked off. Released from her intimidating presence, Emma was finally able to breathe. She didn't even know when she'd *stopped* breathing.

Before she could fall to her knees, Janet caught her. "You're unlucky, grabbing her attention like that."

“Wh-what’d she want with me?”

“Who knows what a sham knight like her was thinking,” Janet replied. She clearly didn’t *want* to know herself.

Still, her description of Chengsi made Emma curious. “Sham knight?”

“People like her love war.” Janet glared hatefully at Chengsi as she walked away. “They’ve got a screw loose. They want to fight so much, they don’t care if they die doing it. If they find someone tough, they just want to challenge them.”

“I know I managed to become a knight, but I don’t have the kind of skill that would interest someone like that.”

Claus gave Emma some kind words when she disparaged herself, although of course he might just have felt some responsibility for his subordinate’s misstep. “Chengsi may be a headache, but her ability to sense someone’s true strength is reliable. She must’ve sensed some kind of potential in you, Lieutenant Rodman. But I suppose I should be following her.” Acknowledging that he couldn’t leave Chengsi alone, Claus set off after her.

“Potential”? In me? There’s no way... Emma first thought of her skill with the Atalanta. The fact that she managed to pilot a craft no one else could gave her life as a knight meaning, since she’d been such a failure beforehand. Nothing else about her that indicated “potential” came to mind, however. She couldn’t imagine what Chengsi had possibly seen in her.

Beyond my ability to pilot the Atalanta, there’s nothing special about me. It’s basically a coincidence that I’m the one who can use her, and otherwise, I have nothing.

Emma was convinced that her proficiency with the craft was no more than luck of the draw.

That’s why I have to make sure the Atalanta’s development goes without a hitch. As far as Emma was concerned, this mission would place her very reason

for being on the line.

Three warships belonging to mercenaries had anchored at the Seventh Weapons Factory's docks.

One mercenary, a woman with black hair and red eyes, was speaking to a factory worker. "I believe we received permission to resupply and do maintenance. Am I wrong? You can't just go back on your word right when we land."

The woman gave off a refined air. In contrast, the worker scratched his head rather awkwardly. "It's not that. It's just that it's expensive to do stuff like that with *us*. I'd recommend mercenaries like you go elsewhere for maintenance and supplies."

The Seventh was only partially government-owned; still, the facility was tied to the Imperial Army first and foremost. As such, it had to prioritize customers from the Army and nobility, and couldn't provide other clients equivalent treatment. The worker felt bad about that, so he'd recommended heading elsewhere, trying to be nice.

The woman didn't back down, however. "We won't make our next assignment if we don't hurry. It's a big one too, so we want our equipment serviced carefully. Hey, we'll even pay a premium to buy some of your new models, if you're selling."

The worker sighed. "I don't want any complaints when you see the bill."

"I know. Thanks."

The weapons factory staff carried out the steps to accept the work.

"Welcome to the Seventh, Phiet Mercenaries. Let's see... Your leader would be...?"

The woman smiled. "You can put down 'Siren,'" she told the worker, then asked, "Where can I see your newest products? I'm very curious about what

you've developed lately."

All the products the Seventh Weapons Factory hadn't yet managed to sell were lined up in the mobile knight storage area. A group including Emma stood at one craft's feet, looking up at it.

"It looks like...a tanuki...?" Emma voiced her honest interpretation of the craft's appearance.

This craft was a Raccoon—a rounder, more solid-looking mobile knight than the slim Teumessa. The Raccoon had been completed before the Teumessa, but not adopted for official use, so hundreds were here in the storage area just waiting to be sold to some customer.

The dwarven team leader Mag Ma, who had led the Third Platoon here, sighed. "It's a cutting-edge craft designed by our 'Mad Genias,'" he explained. "Sure, it looks cute, but its specs don't fall short of the Teumessa's either."

Emma wasn't sure what to think of this Mad Genias. Geniuses were the exact kind of people you'd prefer remain sane.

Percy had accompanied them for the purposes of "scouting out the enemy." When she heard the nickname, she grimaced. "It's just like the Seventh to completely ignore trends and their customer base and just make whatever *they* want... And I gather *she* was involved, huh?" Percy seemed to know the person Mag Ma had called the Mad Genias.

Curious, Molly asked, "Is she really that amazing?"

Percy answered with an indescribable expression. "Well, she's one of those 'fine line' geniuses. But I hear she works exclusively for House Banfield. You don't know her?"

When Percy turned the question on them, Emma and Molly exchanged a look and shook their heads. They'd never even heard rumors about such an engineer.

Percy folded her arms. “I’m not sure I believe the rumors that House Banfield won her over. She’s difficult—I never thought she’d deal with nobles in the first place.”

Hearing Percy’s appraisal, Mag looked away and laughed. “I didn’t know people thought of the little lady like that. Well, she *is* pretty difficult.”

Emma looked up at the Raccoon. “These aren’t used, even though someone so amazing made them?” she wondered.

Mag looked down and scratched his head. “It’s just bad luck.”

“Bad luck?”

He explained why the craft weren’t used. “The Raccoon fulfills the technological requirements for widespread use, but House Banfield’s knights wanted more specialized craft that only a select few ace pilots can master. A Teumessa’s basically a Raccoon stripped of all versatility. In short, it performs better, but it’s harder to control.”

Molly gazed out sadly at the Raccoons stored in the warehouse. “But wouldn’t there be demand for them as mass-produced units? They aren’t, like, knight-only craft with no assist functions, are they?”

The idea that the average pilot couldn’t handle a Raccoon made Mag chuckle. “Of course they’ve got built-in assist functions. They’re not Teumessas. You wouldn’t have to be a knight to pilot one... If anybody used ’em, I think they’d do great in the field.”

“It’s a shame no one buys them, then,” Molly said glumly.

Mag agreed. He looked over the Raccoons, his eyes soft. “They’re cheaper than Teumessas, but not as cheap as Moheives. All we can do is hope your lord’ll shell out for a heap of ’em.”

Some House Banfield personnel who’d been sent to the Seventh for this mission—particularly higher-ups in the military—were currently discussing what equipment upgrades they’d implement. Depending on what they decided,

House Banfield might buy every single Raccoon stored here.

“I bet everyone in *our* squad would be happy to have one,” Emma said, looking up at the Raccoons. Doug and Larry weren’t with them, but she thought they might be a little more motivated if they got new craft to pilot.

Molly seemed to feel the same way. “I know I would! I’d tune ’em up perfectly, too!”

Percy wasn’t too enthusiastic about the idea, but that was only natural, since they were discussing another dev team’s mobile knights. “Since you’ve got the Atalanta, you should round out your unit with Nemains. That’ll look better. The Third’s Nemain is House Banfield’s standard unit anyway. I hope you haven’t forgotten that.”

It was true that the Nemain was the backbone of House Banfield’s military. Count Banfield had adopted that next-generation craft before anyone else, and it was an irreplaceable force within their ranks.

On the other hand, Molly—who actually serviced those machines—seemed less convinced that using Nemains was viable. “It’s true that they perform well across the board. I think you could really call them the Third Weapons Factory’s masterpiece,” she began.

“Right?!” Percy’s eyes sparkled.

Molly’s face soured, however. “But that just means they’re *too* popular, and everyone always fights over them. They’ll never give us Nemains. Besides, I hear the Third’s resistant to mass-producing them.”

Percy clutched her chest. “Th-that’s just because of our previous mass production models. Right now, it’s better if we produce a fixed number of them so we can gather data... B-but we’re working on a mass-produced version with minor tweaks. It’s coming soon, so don’t worry!”

Molly put her hands on her hips, sighing. “Still, I doubt we’ll get Nemains for a while. We’re more likely to get some Raccoons.”

Percy didn't even respond to that. "Anyway, House Banfield loves our Nemains!" she said, forcefully wrapping up the topic. "You can wait a little while, can't you?! The Nemain's worth the wait!"

As Percy tried to strongarm them, Mag cut in. "It was House Banfield who requested a mass-produced unit from our little lady, you know. Wouldn't that be 'cause they're dissatisfied with your Nemains?"

The question obviously frustrated Percy, but it must've struck a chord as well, since she couldn't refute it. She just scrunched her face up and turned away from Mag.

"That girl just has to cause trouble, doesn't she?" Percy muttered, laying the blame squarely on the 'Mad Genias.'

While the group squabbled, another visitor entered the storage area. This woman, accompanied by other Seventh staff members, didn't appear to be affiliated with House Banfield.

She must be another customer, since she doesn't look like one of ours. She's really pretty.

The customer was so gorgeous that even a fellow woman like Emma was captivated. When Emma looked her way, the woman noticed and smiled, then turned quickly to a staff member and pointed out a unique craft among the units in the storage space.

"Why's that Raccoon gold?" she asked.

The woman seemed *curious* about the gaudily painted Raccoon rather than *interested* in it. It was like she questioned the taste of whoever was responsible.

A bit discomfited, one Seventh employee explained, "That's a special unit. Its specs are twice as powerful as other units of its kind, and it was customized with unique rare metal plating."

That interested the woman somewhat, but she still wasn't fond of its appearance. "But gold? No one will buy this thing, right?"

Emma couldn't help agreeing. *Gold is a bit much. And it's a special unit...? I wonder who it was made for?*

Apparently, the staff's general consensus was that it *was* in poor taste, but they didn't want to disparage their own mobile knight.

"It was supposed to be for a regular customer, but the deal fell through," the employee replied. "We'd really like to just sell it already, but because of its intended pilot, we built it without assist functions. Adding them at this point would be difficult, so we're not really sure what to do with it, unfortunately..."

"But it *is* powerful?" the woman asked after a moment.

"Of course. I imagine it would take real getting used to, though."

"Well, I kind of like it, besides the shape and the color."

The staff member shook his head. "Oh, we can't actually sell it... It's possible the customer will change his mind, so the folks up top won't let us put it up for sale." In short, although the people running the factory wouldn't permit a sale, the staff *wanted* to offload it.

"That's too bad," the woman said, but she walked away from the Raccoon without lingering on it.

Chapter 3:

The Mad Genias

IN A SEVENTH WEAPONS FACTORY repair dock, the Melea had been stripped of its armor plating. Gazing at the vessel from inside a building, Emma floated in zero gravity, legs bent under her.

Her hands pressed to the window, she looked down at the Melea's bare form. Its internal apparatuses were rusty and covered in oil, and a fair amount of garbage had been uncovered beneath its plating. Engineers from the Seventh looked down at their tablets as they watched the repairs, grumbling to one another.

"What's still usable? Just the frame and plating?"

"We'll have to replace everything inside it."

"That'll throw the entire craft off. I mean, the frame isn't even constructed the modern way."

"There's enough space inside. It'll work out somehow."

Emma supposed that a place like this could wing battleship repair. Still, she could hardly believe what she was seeing. *Can they really just make those decisions on the fly?*

She thought they'd have discussed all this beforehand, but the engineers were debating what to do with the existing parts on the spot. Emma was listening from a distance away, but most of their discussion went over her head, so she just looked at the Melea thoughtfully.

"I can't wait to see how you're reborn..." she murmured.

Emma was looking forward to the changes they'd make to her mothership. Docked like this, the huge vessel almost resembled a toy. To Emma, the engineers changing out the Melea's parts almost seemed to be putting together

a plastic model.

Man, I could watch stuff like this forever...

As she watched the repairs blissfully, Percy approached her. “Sorry for the wait, Lieutenant Rodman.”

Emma planted her feet on the floor and saluted Percy. “Not a problem.”

“Good, good. Shall we get going, then? The Atalanta’s ready for you. I’d like to finish making final adjustments.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Emma left, following Percy.

The Third Weapons Factory’s development team bustled around the Atalanta, which was hooked to various cables in one of the Seventh’s hangars. Emma climbed into the cockpit, wearing her pilot suit. She sat down with the hatch still open, Percy standing beside her.

“How’s the new Atalanta, Lieutenant Rodman?”

“Hmm... Well, it looks really strong now.” They’d done some joint work that gave the craft a different look, so that was Emma’s first impression.

Percy made a face at the comment. “The previous model couldn’t withstand its own generator’s power,” she admitted with some chagrin.

“N-nope.”

“The massive amount of energy the generator produced had nowhere to go—even though moving the Atalanta consumes more energy than moving a Nemain.”

Emma wasn’t sure how to respond to her explanation of the previous model’s faults.

Raising both hands, Percy continued, “But that problem’s a thing of the past now! We added a mechanism to disperse the excess energy the Atalanta

generates. On top of that, the mechanism should support the craft's movements."

"W-wow!" Emma stammered.

"I'll just choose to believe that you understood all that..." It sounded like Percy was giving up on explaining anything more to Emma. "All you need to know is that the joints are stronger now, and the craft will purge excess energy. There shouldn't be any danger of it going haywire from an overload anymore."

Previously, the Atalanta couldn't use all the energy it generated in battle, and the overtaxed craft would break down. Until that defect was fixed, the craft would be a failure. They could simply remove its *capacity* to overload, but then the Atalanta would lose its superiority over other mobile knights. It would be an overly expensive ace-only craft that lacked the power to justify its price; that wouldn't solve the problem at all.

The engineers removed the cables from the Atalanta, which began to walk around the hangar. Percy and the dev team watched like hawks.

"How's it feel?" Percy asked.

"It's easier to move than before." The craft was without a doubt more responsive than it had been when Emma first piloted it.

Percy puffed her chest out proudly. "Well, of course it is. We analyzed all your data and calibrated it perfectly for you. That's not a compliment—it's just obvious!" For its obviousness, she still seemed awfully pleased to hear it. But...

Wha—?

It was only for a moment, but Emma felt something strange. The Atalanta seemed to go limp for a split second. It was so brief, she wondered if she'd imagined it. Another pilot would likely have brushed it off.

Was that just my imagination?

The test continued, and Emma cleared every task they wanted her to perform in the hangar. Satisfied with the Atalanta's performance, Percy decided they'd

move to the next testing stage.

“Mm. Good. We can do the space tests in a few days.”

“Oh, okay,” Emma said, distracted. She was still thinking about that weird feeling.

“What?” Percy asked. “Already tired? Shape up, Lieutenant! Your life’s on the line when you test an experimental craft, you know! A second’s inattention could cost your life.”

“I-I’ll be careful.” Emma focused, turning her thoughts to tomorrow’s tests.

It’s fine. There was nothing wrong with it... The data says the same thing, so I’m sure it’s okay, she told herself. Still, the memory bothered her.

Before Percy could move on from the cockpit, Emma called out, “Um—just once, there was sort of a weird feeling right at the beginning. Is that a problem?”

Percy turned around and sighed, looking over the data. “I wish you’d brought up something like that when it happened.”

“I’m sorry.” Emma deflated a bit. She really should’ve spoken up sooner.

Percy and the other engineers checked the data. “I can’t find any issues in the numbers.”

Hearing that there was no problem, Emma sighed in relief. “All right. It must’ve been my mistake, then.”

Now she could move to the next tests without worrying... So she told herself, anyway.

Emma climbed out of the cockpit to find a woman in a lab coat standing at the Atalanta’s feet, looking up at the craft. She wasn’t part of the dev team, so Emma called out to her curiously, making sure she could draw her weapon at any time.

“Who might you be?”

The woman glanced over. She had straight black hair cut at her shoulders, and since she wore glasses, she had an intellectual look. Something about her set her apart from other people, however. She seemed both to look and not look at Emma. She gave the pilot a smile, but it was clearly forced.

Emma could guess that the woman wasn't particularly skilled at fighting, regardless of whether she was a soldier. The knight sensed that she wouldn't lose to her in a fight, but she found something else about the woman frightening.

She's scary. Why is everyone around me so scary lately...?

Seeing Emma freeze up, nervous, the woman tapped her lab coat's nameplate a few times. It indicated that her rank was engineering major and stated her position at the Seventh Weapons Factory.

“Oh. You're from the Seventh.” Emma relaxed immediately.

The woman smiled at her. “Sorry for interrupting. I'm Nias... Engineering Major Nias Carlin.” She gave Emma a perfunctory salute.

Emma straightened up and saluted back. “Lieutenant Emma Rodman.”

“Oh? You're the rumored pilot, then?”

“Huh? Rumored?” Emma wasn't aware of any rumors going around about her.

Nias took a lollipop out of her lab coat, unwrapped it, and placed it in her mouth. With the stick poking out between her lips, she almost looked as though she was smoking. “I heard you're a genius pilot,” Nias told Emma, sucking the candy.

“Oh, no, that's not true.” Emma scratched her head, embarrassed.

The smiling Nias *agreed* with her. “Didn't think so. From the look of you, you're a good match for this piece of junk.”

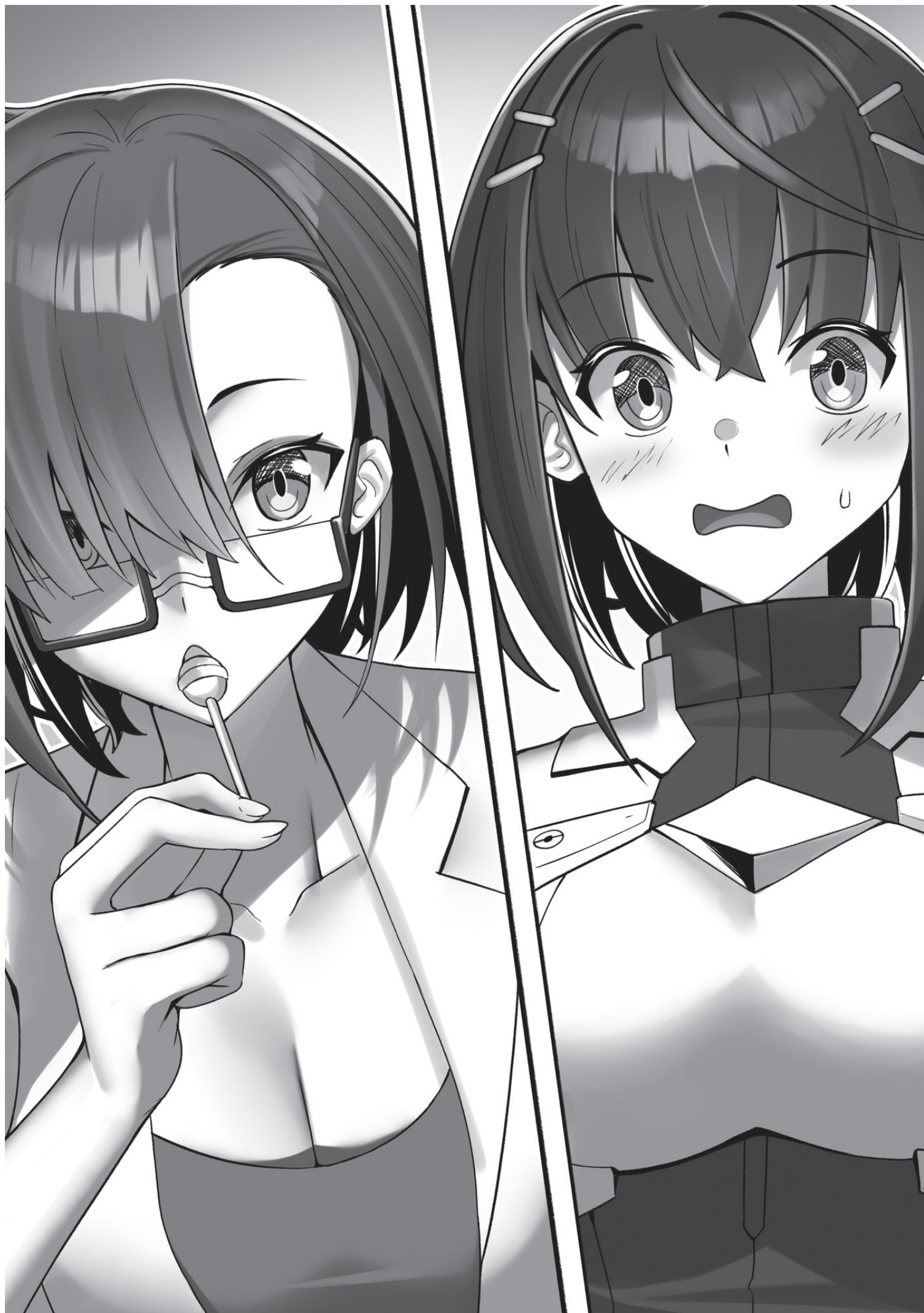
“Yes, I’m a good match for... Huh?” For a second, Emma couldn’t understand what Nias had said. She froze.

Nias looked up at the Atalanta expressionlessly, as though she’d lost interest in the girl. “This thing’s no good. It’s defective; you shouldn’t be piloting it.”

That was like saying Emma should let go of the confidence she’d finally grasped. Emma clenched her fists and hung her head. When she responded, her voice was full of emotion, and it echoed through the hangar. “No! I *will* pilot the Atalanta!”

Nias cocked her head, looking a bit surprised. She observed Emma as though the knight was some kind of rare creature. “You want to die?”

Emma shook her head, her hair flying around her face. “I *won’t* die. And the Atalanta won’t break, either. We’ll complete it!” She raised her head and gave Nias a determined look.



The other woman, however, sneered at Emma as if to say her determination was worthless. “I’m telling you that attaching yourself to a defective machine is foolish. You and that dev team are both perfect matches for this thing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just what I said.”

She spoke as though she knew something about the Atalanta that Emma didn’t, a flaw Emma hadn’t yet figured out. That scared the knight; she had to wonder whether Nias’s warning was related to her odd sensation earlier. Nias apparently didn’t plan to explain, though. She seemed to prefer savoring her candy over saying more about the Atalanta or Emma.

“When I first put this in my mouth, I didn’t really like the taste. But the more I suck on it... Mmm. It isn’t bad...”

“Give me details!”

At this point, the dev team was getting curious about what was going on between the pair. Percy strode over, jabbing her finger at Nias. “Hey. This hangar’s off limits to anyone not involved in testing. How’d you even get in here?”

Nias wasn’t a bit intimidated. “Should’ve beefed your security up a little more. Though I get why you wouldn’t, since there’s nothing really worth seeing about this craft,” she said with a smile.

Just like that, she turned around and left. The dev staff—and Emma—watched sourly as she departed after disparaging the Atalanta.

What was with her? I can guarantee how amazing the Atalanta will be! Emma’s frustration fueled her determination to make sure the tests were successful.

Slightly outside the Seventh Weapons Factory’s threat-detection radius, a group of suspicious ships maintained a line formation. There was a nervous

energy throughout the vessels; their operation was about to commence.

The fleet captain looked down at his subordinates from the bridge. “We’ve got the details from the commander. The target will perform a test in space three days from now.”

His adjutant whistled. “Impressive as always. How does she even get intel like that?”

“This is nothing for her.” The captain looked proud. “Still, she endangered herself to get that info. We can’t screw this up.”

The adjutant sobered. “Just leave it to us. Hey, want to test *our* new craft, too?”

The captain folded his arms. “Those, eh? Can we really use ‘em?”

“The mobile knight pilots all seem to like them. They may look small and unimpressive, but still, they *are* new. They’ll come in handier than crummy old mid-sized craft.”

“Well, do as you like, then. Just make sure you destroy the target.”

“Yes, sir!”

Three days later, the Atalanta finished the necessary checks and began space tests in a sector near Asteroid Neia. Molly, Larry, and Doug watched the test from a transport vessel lounge.

The Third Platoon members, as well as the dev team, viewed the mobile knight on a huge monitor. Larry, of course, was apparently bored already; he was playing a portable game.

“Why’d we have to come along?” he grumbled. “It’s not like we have craft to pilot, so what’re we even doing here?”

“It might be pointless, but it’s easier for the people at the top just to order the whole platoon around as a group,” Doug replied, watching the tests. “They

don't even hear our complaints.”

“Hunh. That makes sense,” Molly said, enjoying her drink.

While the three griped about upper management, an alarm suddenly sounded aboard the ship. Doug leaped up immediately, the reaction drilled into him by all his training and combat experience. He realized something quickly, however.

“Tch! That's right. There's nothing for us to pilot.”

Larry set his console down on the table, taking out his terminal instead to figure out the situation. “Damn. Nobody aboard the ship even knows what's going on. I mean, it'll *probably* be fine—I'm sure a defense force from the Seventh will be here soon.”

Molly, who was watching the monitor, covered her mouth in shock. “Emma!”

Around the Atalanta was a swarm of units under fourteen meters tall. The small craft were deep blue and had no marks identifying either their affiliation or their place of manufacture. They were complete unknowns.

Chapter 4: Self-Destruction

AS ALARMS RANG ceaselessly inside the Atalanta's cockpit, Emma's voice rose in panic. "Why is this happening now?! I only have a test rifle with me!"

Six unidentified mobile knights had appeared, and Emma had to decide how to deal with them sooner rather than later. She had no idea where they'd come from, and she couldn't spot anything resembling a mothership they might've sortied from.

She heard Percy's confused voice over the comm line to the transport vessel the dev team was aboard. *"Well? Where're they from?!"*

"Unknown. We can't identify the craft model either."

"What do they want? Have they made any demands?!"

"No, ma'am."

Emma prepared to engage the approaching craft. *My gun may be no good, but I still have my blade!*



She threw her test rifle aside and pulled the hilt of her laser blade from her side skirt. A sword of blue-white light appeared as her craft's other arm raised her shield.

"Ugh!"

A moment later, a bullet from an enemy rifle struck her. Some of her attackers were equipped with physical weaponry, while others had optical weapons. They were all quick and highly maneuverable, in keeping with their small size.

Surrounded by such enemies, the Atalanta dodged in all directions, holding up its shield. Emma was confident that she wouldn't lose a contest of speed, even without overloading the Atalanta. However maneuverable the enemy was, the Atalanta could escape them—at least, that was what she thought.

"I can't drum up any power!"

The astounding speed the Atalanta had displayed before its modifications seemed completely out of reach to Emma now. Bluish-white electricity sparked from the mobile knight's upgraded joints; it was emitting energy its systems considered superfluous.

"I can't get away like this!"

Emma descended straight downward, and three enemy craft lunged at the spot where she'd just been with spears. So far, she was surviving, but she was getting nervous about the Atalanta's lack of power.

However much I raise its output, it isn't going to make a difference if all the power leaks out the joints! This isn't the Atalanta at all!

She couldn't even draw out the craft's pre-improvement capabilities. Right now, the Atalanta was letting energy it *needed* escape its joints. That, Emma realized, was what had been bothering her ever since the first tests. *This wouldn't be happening if I'd been more insistent!* She couldn't help thinking that doing things differently would've prevented this.

Percy updated her. *“Just survive for the next three minutes, Lieutenant Rodman! The Seventh’s defense force just sortied!”*

All Emma had to do was scrape by until her allies arrived—but her enemies seemed like experienced fighters. They were using their superior maneuverability to corner the Atalanta. To her, their movements came off as relaxed.

At this point, Emma’s breathing was labored. *They aren’t faster than me, but I can’t outrun them either. At this rate, I won’t last three minutes. That means...!*

Having decided her situation was dangerous, Emma reached toward a hastily constructed box in the cockpit. There were three covered buttons and some switches on the box. With her pointer finger, Emma lifted each button cover.

Percy must’ve noticed what she was doing. *“You can’t remove the limiter!”* she hastily tried to persuade Emma.

The knight didn’t listen. She pressed the buttons one by one. *“The Atalanta will be up to it for a few minutes!” I could’ve handled this before, so I should be able to swing it now, too!*

The last time Emma faced space pirates in the Atalanta, the mobile knight had performed extraordinarily well. If she could utilize that same ability even briefly, she could get away from the enemy craft or maybe even defeat them.

“Let’s go, Atalanta!”

“Stop! Without more testing, we have no way to know what’ll happen!”

Although she heard Percy yelling, Emma went through with her strategy without blinking. As soon as she removed the Atalanta’s limiter, the craft began to glow yellow. All the data Emma could access showed its power rising. At the same time, another alarm sounded.

Overloading the mobile knight strained it considerably, but the Atalanta’s excessive energy was also its trump card, the reason it qualified as a “special” craft. The sparks flying from its joints changed from blue to yellow and grew

fiercer, making it obvious that something about the Atalanta had changed.

“I can get away like this! Huh...?”

Pressing the foot pedals and moving the control sticks, Emma felt none of the resistance she had up till now. Both controls had *too much* give...and the Atalanta didn't respond at all to either. She'd accidentally severed the strings connecting her to the Atalanta.

She guessed that she'd feel gravitational pull inside the cockpit next, but what she actually felt was the jolt of an explosion.

“No way...” she murmured, eyes wide.

Flames spewed from the Atalanta's joints—both elbows and both knees. Although it hadn't been hit by an attack, the craft was destroying itself from the inside out.

Her enemies must've thought she'd blown herself up. As her mobile knight drifted, now disarmed, they seemed momentarily confused over how to proceed. They quickly made up their minds, however, pointing their guns at the Atalanta.

I'm dead!

The moment Emma was sure her death was imminent, a Moheive that had sortied from the transport vessel attacked with one of the craft's work tools—a nail gun. The spike it shot knocked the enemy's rifle off target.

“You okay, kid?!”

“Doug!”

He'd come to her rescue. Another Moheive, piloted by Larry, was behind him. Both mobile knights were yellow, indicating that they were work craft with no fighting equipment.

Larry seemed to regret even venturing out. *“In units that don't even have decent weapons, we're dead! My life's over! And it's all 'cause you're so reckless, Doug!”*

“Hey, you’re the one who came with me. You’re a good kid, Larry.”

After the Moheives arrived, the enemy craft distanced itself from the Atalanta. Larry shot at them too, but his nail gun wasn’t meant as a weapon; it was difficult to aim accurately and easy for enemies to dodge. Quickly noticing that Doug and Larry were only in work craft, the enemies charged in once more, resuming their attack.

Doug clicked his tongue at how quickly they caught on. *“Wanted to buy a little more time than that, but... Heh heh. Should’ve stuck to what I’m good at,”* he remarked. *“Those guys are gonna laugh at me...”* He must’ve given up and begun remembering bygone comrades.

Larry was on the verge of tears. *“Damn it! This is why I didn’t want to try this!”*

If no one had intervened, the enemy would likely have destroyed their three craft at any moment. Fortunately, the Seventh Weapons Factory’s defense force arrived earlier than predicted. There were twelve of them—all mobile knights crafted by the Seventh themselves.

“You okay?! We’ll take things from here!”

As soon as the defense force showed up, the enemies retreated. Where were they even going, given that their mothership was nowhere nearby?

As the defense force pursued the enemy, Doug flew his Moheive over to the Atalanta and grabbed hold of it. *“You’re okay, right, kid? Good job getting through that.”*

He didn’t usually speak to Emma so softly. She teared up, happy first and foremost that they’d come to save her. She couldn’t hold her feelings in anymore.

“Doug, I...” she sobbed.

Doug sighed. *“Anyone on the battlefield can get killed,”* he told her. *“If you’re not ready for that, you should leave the force now.”*

He must've assumed she was crying out of fear of death, but she wasn't. "Yeah, but I...I broke the Atalanta..." She was touched that they'd come to save her, but she now felt her own worthlessness even more keenly.

Her words stunned Doug. *"Huh? Who cares right now?!"*

"I care!" Emma wailed. "The Atalanta was like the proof that I'm a knight! I thought I'd finally taken a step closer to *him!*"

She was so frustrated, she couldn't stop weeping. Her anger and sadness were all the more pronounced because she had finally felt like she'd advanced toward her dream. Once she'd begun piloting the Atalanta, she'd seen herself as at least a little closer to her role model. She'd been more eager than ever to become a knight who fought for justice. However little she'd really moved forward, she treasured the Atalanta for shortening the distance toward that dream. She couldn't forgive herself for destroying it through her own mistake.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry, Atalanta..."

The Atalanta returned to the hangar in a pitiful state. Fixed in place with several wires, it looked like it had been strung up with its limbs torn off.

In zero gravity, Emma floated with her arms wrapped around her legs, gazing at the mobile knight. *This is all because I removed the limiter. None of this would've happened if I hadn't.* She kept regretting that moment.

"I'm sorry, Atalanta." She looked up at the mobile knight. "We might not be able to finish you after all."

Despite its upgrades, the craft had overloaded and self-destructed. For the Atalanta's dev team, that was a huge failure. Apparently, the Third Weapons Factory's management was already debating calling off the mobile knight's development. Many wanted to continue developing it, but many were against the idea as well.

From the sour look on Percy's face when she returned to the hangar, it

seemed likely that the team had decided to discontinue the Atalanta's development. It wouldn't be worth throwing tons of money into improvements if the craft couldn't produce results.

Emma began to cry again. "I really am a failure of a knight."

She'd finally gotten an opportunity to be a real knight, and had ruined it with her own hands. She felt pathetic just thinking about it.

The Phiet Mercenaries' mothership was being maintained and resupplied at one of the Seventh Weapons Factory's docks. An arm on the wall fixed it in place, a section of outer armor stripped off.

As Seventh personnel bustled about busily, Siren watched them from the bridge. She crossed her arms, expressionless, and muttered as if someone was next to her, "I suppose we can't call this a success."

Her shadow wavered, and then a response came from within. One of her subordinates lurked inside. "We failed?"

"Well, we didn't destroy it. It destroyed *itself*. Don't think the client will be very happy with us." She could just imagine their complaints.

Her subordinate seemed to agree. "Then we continue the operation."

"Yeah. Tell everyone the request's not finished yet. How'd our new units perform?"

When she changed the subject, her subordinate's tone lightened. "The pilots and mechanics both love 'em. They're easy to maneuver and service—and easy on the wallet, so even the guys in accounts like 'em."

"That's rare." Siren was a little surprised to hear the pilots, mechanics, *and* bean counters approved of the craft. "After our tests are done, maybe we'll adopt them for official use."

As she considered this, her subordinate suggested, "Why not switch to a Buckler yourself, Commander? Your own craft's reaching its limit, right?"

Siren frowned. "The Buckler's not my type. Maybe I'll pick something up here. There *is* a craft I've got a soft spot for." She was envisioning the foxlike Teumessa.

Her subordinate didn't seem at all bothered that she'd rejected his suggestion. "The stuff here's expensive, you know. You want to *buy* something?"

"Of course not. I'll just...borrow it."

Chapter 5:

On The Chopping Block

PERCY, WHO'D BEEN DISPATCHED from the Third Weapons Factory in her capacity as head of the Atalanta's development team, had gathered with several people from House Banfield in a meeting room on House Banfield's flagship. They sat on opposite sides of a long table, discussing the future of their joint special-unit development plans.

Participating as House Banfield's representative, Claus narrowed his eyes at the documents in front of him. He didn't normally display much emotion, so he obviously wasn't pleased with what he saw.

"It was agreed that the Third Weapons Factory would take responsibility for the experimental craft. Seeking reparations from House Banfield is against our contract."

The soldiers and bureaucrats accompanying Claus had equally displeased expressions. They were angry at the Third Weapons Factory's proposal.

Meanwhile, Percy had a rather complicated look on her face, for a couple of reasons. The first was that her superiors were ignoring the contract they'd signed with House Banfield, from which they were brazenly requesting more funding. The second was that *she'd* been blamed for wasting the huge development funds poured into the Atalanta. To make matters worse, she'd been dragged into a faction war occurring within the Third Weapons Factory.

Still, all she could do was pass along her superiors' demands to House Banfield. She'd been forced into a rather unpleasant situation.

"When it comes to the special craft's development, my superiors don't agree. They wish to continue, but we've lost a lot of money on the project already. At this rate, we'll have no choice but to cancel development. If you wish it to proceed—"

Before Percy could finish, Claus supplied, ““Pay us the funds we lack’?”

“Yes...” Percy replied reluctantly.

As the person in charge of the project, she was ashamed to beg for money. Of course, her shame didn’t make the demand any more appealing to House Banfield. A man with a general’s insignia on his military uniform glared at her.

At one point, he also directed his glare at Emma, who’d been forced to attend this meeting too. She sat nervously in a chair in one corner of the meeting room. The meaning of the occasional glances those at the table shot her way were all too obvious: “She’s the failed knight who saddled us with this.”

“We’re aware of this project’s importance,” the general said. “After all, we witnessed the special craft’s performance on the battlefield. Still, I don’t see any reason why we should have to fund *your* product.”

Another general joined in. “After all, House Banfield already has a relationship with the *Seventh* Weapons Factory, utilizing several of their special craft. Our lord even entrusted them with providing his own personal craft.”

House Banfield’s frequent patronage of the Seventh Weapons Factory was well known within the Empire. Percy must’ve been aware of it as well, but she wouldn’t back down. That was how badly she wanted to keep developing the Atalanta.

“I’m aware,” she replied. “However, I’d assert that the Third Weapons Factory is *also* an important military supplier for House Banfield.”

The Seventh Weapons Factory might’ve had more of a hand in the house’s special craft, but the Third supplied most of House Banfield’s mass-produced units, and was thus a great support to its military as well. The Nemain mobile knight model was the best example. All the soldiers were, of course, aware of that; they grimaced awkwardly at the reminder.

Claus spoke up again, seeming much calmer than anyone else in the room. “I don’t think we should be the ones making this decision. After all, *he’s* been

involved in the Atalanta's development from the start."

He. The soldiers' reactions to what Claus said varied: surprise, annoyance, anxiety.

Clasping his hands, Claus informed Percy that they'd put the decision on hold for the moment. "We'll get back to you as soon as we can, but *he's* rather busy. Do you mind waiting for our response?"

Percy gathered that further persuasion would be pointless. She backed off immediately. "No, I understand. I'll inform my superiors."

When the meeting ended, Percy and the soldiers left the room. The only two people who stayed behind were Claus and Emma, whom Claus stopped on her way out.

"Lieutenant Rodman, I want to hear your honest thoughts."

"Y-yes, sir!" Emma stiffened.

Claus gave her an awkward smile. "You don't need to be nervous. I'd just like your personal opinion. Do you think the Atalanta can be finished?"

"U-um..." Emma wasn't sure how to answer; that struck her as a technical question.

While she deliberated, Claus used his terminal to display several screens around himself. They contained data on the Atalanta. "The Third Weapons Factory's craft certainly has high specs, but there are likely only a handful of people in House Banfield who could pilot it, including you. Will a mobile knight like that ever really be completed? I want you to weigh in."

He was asking whether the Atalanta could ever be finished and weaponized. From his perspective, the craft had rather glaring flaws: the limited number of people who could pilot it, as well as its safety. No knight or soldier would choose to fight with an unreliable weapon on a battlefield.

In light of that, Claus wanted Emma to predict whether the Third Weapons

Factory could really complete the project.

“Are you implying that we should stop developing the Atalanta because it isn’t a finished weapon at this point?” she asked, hanging her head.

The Atalanta was essentially the reason for Emma’s existence. Canceling its development would be a logical decision for the military, but Emma herself couldn’t accept it.

Since her feelings on the matter were clearly personal, Claus brought up the Atalanta’s purpose. “House Banfield’s main mobile knight is the Nemain. Our lord approved the Atalanta’s development because an improved Nemain model would benefit the domain. You understand that this project isn’t the small-scale development of a single special unit, right?”

“I-I...” Emma’s gaze wandered. She’d just realized that she had been so focused on the Atalanta itself that she lost sight of the larger rationale for creating it. The army wouldn’t want to spend a ludicrous amount of money developing one special unit. They had put personnel and money into this project because it was supposed to profit them and the Third Weapons Factory.

She hung her head again when Claus presented the harsh reality of the situation, clenching her fists in frustration.

I’ve been so focused on what’s right in front of me. I never really thought about the project’s significance. That had been explained to her, of course—she knew the Atalanta was supposed to be an evolution of the Nemain model. None of that had sunk in, however. *There were much higher stakes behind all this, but I was so focused on being acknowledged as a knight, I didn’t see anything else...*

When Claus saw how hard Emma was taking his reminder, he softened his tone. “I know you have a personal attachment to this unit, but it’s not our place to consider how it’ll be used. We should just carry out the mission we were entrusted with. So, let me ask one more time. Do you think the Atalanta can be finished?”

Can it? Emma bit her lip. *The mission I was entrusted with...is to help complete*

the Atalanta!

She looked up, staring right into Claus's eyes. "I'll look after getting it finished."

Sensing Emma's determination, Claus closed the screens around him. "I see."

After dismissing Emma, Claus wrote a report on the Atalanta's current state. As he finished up, he referenced data displayed in the air around him; one document was on the craft's test pilot, Emma.

Looking over her data, Claus spotted a strange detail. "I had a feeling something was off. Her grades at the knight academy were abysmal."

Emma—who'd just graduated from the academy—had already risen to B rank, and she was a lieutenant to boot. She'd received her promotion faster than knights on the fast track to elite status, yet been deployed to a security force in the border regions.

"No wonder she's so attached to that experimental unit."

Until she began piloting the Atalanta, Emma hadn't had any achievements to her name. If anything, she'd been a complete failure as a knight. But she'd finally gotten her hands on an opportunity to make a difference—the Atalanta. It made perfect sense to Claus that she was particular about the craft.

"I hope she realizes that just piloting a craft no one else could means there's something unique about her."

While Claus understood Emma's outlook, he wanted her to think more highly of her own abilities. He pictured the knight. He'd gotten the sense that there was a lot she lacked, but his overall impression wasn't negative.

"She's the typical youngster who doesn't see anything other than what's right in front of her. Her enthusiasm's real enough, though."

It was clear to him that Emma and Percy were both passionate about the Atalanta, and their passion made him want to help in whatever way he could.

He arranged the data on the prototype around him and folded his arms, looking it over.

“If they finish it, we’ll surely have achieved something better than the current Nemain model. That’ll benefit us without a doubt, since we’ve gotten so much use out of the Nemains,” he murmured.

In addition to his report, he drafted another document—a personal recommendation that the Atalanta’s development continue.

Signing the electronic documents, Claus sighed. “Well, that’s about all I can do. The rest is up to fate.”

Emma floated in the hangar in front of the bound Atalanta, her face on her knees. Beside her, a rather bewildered Molly did her best to cheer her superior up.

“There was nothing you could’ve done! Percy said the same thing, didn’t she? The thing was never supposed to blow up like that! You shouldn’t feel like it was *your* fault.”

It was true that Emma wasn’t solely at fault for the incident. The dev team naturally shared a large portion of the blame. Still, Percy had foreseen that overloading the craft would endanger the combat data she was gathering, and she’d tried to stop Emma. Emma was the one who’d shrugged off her advice.

“It *was* my fault. I made the wrong call. None of this would’ve happened if I hadn’t removed the limiter.” Emma stared at the limbless, broken Atalanta, tears filling her eyes.

Molly kept trying to get Emma to understand what she was saying. “Argh! You’re just being bleak and beating yourself up! What’s moping about this going to do? If you’re so down in the dumps after Doug and Larry saved your life, how do you think they feel?”

To save Emma, the two men had rushed into danger in Moheives that were

merely work grade. Picturing their faces, Emma hung her head. *Come to think of it, I haven't thanked them yet. I need to tell them how grateful I am.*

She wiped her tears away, deciding to track them down. "I'll go thank them."

Now that Emma was finally getting into gear, Molly sighed in relief. "You should. If you never said anything about it, it'd be pretty awkward."

The thing was, Emma wasn't sure how to express gratitude in a situation like this. Doug and Larry had saved her life. Could she thank them for that with words alone?

"I'd like to give them something. What would be good?"

Molly looked up for a moment, thinking. "Well, it'd have to be booze for Doug. I don't know about Larry, though. He might be happy with some money to spend on his games."

"W-would money be enough?" Emma wasn't crazy about that idea, but she couldn't think of anything else Larry would like.

Come to think of it, I don't know anything about my squadron mates, do I?

Once the sun set, Asteroid Neia's residential area grew dark. When night fell, Emma and the Third Platoon visited the asteroid's entertainment district.

For a "district," it was small; there wasn't that much room on the asteroid. Thus, the area was infamously crowded at night.

The Third Platoon sat inside a bar where every single seat was taken. Almost all the patrons were visiting the Seventh, and there were quite a few members of House Banfield inside. Knights and soldiers had brought squad mates here to unwind.

Even the bar's seats were close together. Emma's group had been seated just next to another party of patrons, and the space was cramped and noisy.

Over that noise, Emma held up her nonalcoholic drink. "W-well, umm...

cheers?”

To thank Doug and Larry for saving her life, she was picking up the tab for their night out. She'd raised her glass to kick off their little gathering, but her greeting ended up rather awkward. Emma had hung out with colleagues before, but this was her first time drinking with her subordinates in her assigned squad. She wasn't quite sure how to go about it.

Larry ignored her, ordering menu items as if his life depended on it. With the tap of a button, the terminal-style menu sent orders directly from the table to the kitchen.

“If you're treating us, I can order whatever I want, right?” he asked, going through and selecting the most expensive things on the menu. He didn't have a shred of self-restraint.

Molly gave him an exasperated look. “You could at least pretend to control yourself. Think about poor Emma's bank account.”

Larry stopped ordering, instead handing the menu to Doug. “You're clueless as always, Molly.”

“Why are you criticizing me?!”

“Unlike *us*, a knight will be well paid. Especially a B-rank lieutenant. I'm sure we'd be shocked to see her salary.”

Molly gaped. “Are you rich, Emma?!”

Emma's face twitched a bit at the pair. “Er, I do think my salary's pretty good, but I'm not paid *that* much. Besides, knights have more expenses too.”

To support their powerful physiques, knights consumed more calories than normal people. To keep their strength up, they had to eat twice as much as average, even if they were just living a normal life. Knights had other expenses that were higher than average as well, so if they'd been paid the same amount as regular soldiers, they couldn't have made ends meet.

Chugging a tankard of beer, Doug laughed at Emma's excuse. He was already

ordering his next drink from the menu. “You’ve got to be generous at times like this, or you won’t win your subordinates’ hearts. If you’re grateful to us for saving you, let us go a little overboard.”

Emma *couldn’t* exactly be stingy after they’d saved her life, and she conceded that point, perhaps a little overzealously. “I get it, already. I get it! Just order whatever you want!”

Doug grinned. “That’s what I like to hear, kid. I’ll drink some of this pricy booze, then.”

A server was already bringing Larry the dishes he’d ordered, each of which looked expensive.

“That’s that,” said Larry. “Come on, Molly, you order whatever you want too.”

Taking the menu, Molly gave Emma a dubious look. “I don’t know...”

At this point, Emma was all in. “It’s fine. Go ahead and order whatever you want, Molly! I *am* a knight, after all! That’s right. I’m a knight...” By the end of her speech, her voice had almost died.

Emma’s “I’m-a-knight” rationale didn’t really make sense, but Molly must’ve accepted it. She tapped the terminal. “Then I’ll have this...and this too!”

She ordered more and more, and the total in the menu’s bottom-right corner went up and up.

With a strained smile, Emma watched the digits climb. *Ah ha ha ha ha...! I’ll have to be frugal this month, huh...?*

As her squad mates got truly drunk, Emma decided she’d try to get to know them better. She felt that, under the circumstances, she might hear things from them that she wouldn’t have normally. The three were definitely more relaxed with some alcohol in them.

“Can I ask you a question, Doug?”

“Yeah?” Doug was grinning, perhaps happy to have a chance to drink things he wouldn’t usually be able to.

Given his mood, Emma thought she could get away with a slightly personal question. “How can I motivate the people aboard the Melea a little more?”

When he heard her ask that, Doug froze for a moment. Larry stopped eating as well, glaring up at Emma. For a second, she worried that she’d upset them.

Then Doug scratched his head, smiling wryly. He wasn’t angry; he was just exasperated with her. “You want us to be more motivated?”

“Of course!”

He would normally have brushed off a question like this, but he actually engaged with it this evening. He must’ve considered it repayment for the expensive drinks. “Why don’t I tell you a story, kid?”

“Story?” For a second, Emma suspected he was trying to worm out of answering.

Then he began his story. “From before they reorganized the old army. We were crazy busy every day back then. Still annoys me to think about.”

House Banfield had been in rather dire straits until the current count, Liam, took over. The domain had declined terribly prior to that point, and the military was no better.

“All the weapons we got were secondhand. That was fine if they were usable, but sometimes we were issued broken crap we couldn’t even fight with. We repaired what we could and made do with what we got.”

Any mobile knights they received were mass-produced units like Moheives that could be bought dirt cheap. A lot could barely move and had to be repaired immediately before being used.

Emma’s face fell. She’d heard this before, and she sympathized with those who went through such an awful time. “I’m told it was really bad back then.”

Doug gave her an inscrutable look. “Keep your pity to yourself. Without

having gone through it, you can't understand what it was like. Anyway, we did our best with what we had...but there were quite a few delinquents back then, too."

"Delinquents?" Emma asked.

Doug chuckled. "You're picturing us, aren't you?"

"N-no..." He was spot-on. Emma just averted her eyes, laughing awkwardly.

Seeing right through her, Doug continued, "My group was diligent back then, really. Other guys wouldn't even fight; they just ran. But *somebody* had to fight, or we couldn't protect the populace. So *we* fought. We fought...and protected them as best as we could."

"You told me this before—"

"And we lost a lot of good people."

Emma swallowed what she'd been about to say.

Doug's expression had turned deadly serious by this point. "In fact, I lost almost everyone I knew back then. Superior officers who treated me well, colleagues I competed with. A lot were really good people, and they all died."

Some booze he'd ordered arrived. He drank it as he continued.

"We lost everything, but still, we thought what we were doing meant something. Then the new count took over, and everything changed...and that was the last straw." Doug looked into the distance, and it seemed like his spirit was completely broken.

If not for people like him, I might not have even been born, Emma thought.

After Liam took power, Doug and his contemporaries had begun slacking, but before that, they'd done everything they could to protect Hydra, House Banfield's home planet. They fought for a long time, losing countless companions.

But that onetime excellence was why Emma wanted them to get back on their

feet. “I realize that we’re only here today thanks to your sacrifices, but don’t you want to put that effort into things again? I mean, you all stayed in the military of your own free will, didn’t you?”

While restructuring its forces, House Banfield had prepared paths out of the military for anyone who wanted. The fact that Doug was still serving meant that he’d *chosen* to stay.

Doug’s response was to laugh self-deprecatingly. “I’ve been in the military so long, I just can’t see myself doing anything else. But I figure I did my time. The least the brass can do is let me coast for the rest of my days here.”

“I don’t believe you,” Emma told him. “If that were true, you wouldn’t have saved me. You had to charge the enemy in a work-grade Moheive to do that.”

When she brought up what’d happened just the other day, Doug fell silent and scratched his head. “I’d like to know why I did that, too.” He apparently didn’t have an explanation for his spontaneous heroics.

Having listened quietly up to that point, Larry cut in. “This is part of why I hate knights. Do they just like butting in on other people’s business or something?” There was a sour look on his face.

“Do you *really* hate knights that much?”

“Yeah, I do. I can’t believe you made Doug relive the past like that.”

“I-I just wanted to know more about my team.”

“Yeah, well, Doug lost a lover and a brother in the fighting back then.”

“What?” Emma looked over at Doug in shock, but he just sipped at his drink, his eyes downcast. Still, from the look on his face, he seemed to be thinking back on someone.

Larry was riled up about Emma blindly trespassing into Doug’s past. “After he’d lost his lover and his little brother, the count just threw him and his friends away as if he was done with them... The knights who look up to that guy as though he’s a hero of justice, like *you*, are the ones I hate most.”

Emma felt badly about dredging up such painful memories for Doug, but she also couldn't bear hearing the person she admired disparaged like that. And *she* was probably a little drunk, too. "You know, I heard *you* wanted to be one of those knights you hate so much, Larry."

Larry turned his glare toward Doug and said accusingly, "Doug?"

Doug just gave him an awkward look. "What's the matter? Why don't you tell her yourself? Good opportunity, isn't it? If she hears what you went through, maybe she'll come to her senses."

Though it seemed to annoy him to no end, Larry decided to open up about his past, too—if only so Emma would "come to her senses" and stop idealizing knights as battling for justice. "Well, yeah, I admired knights too a long time ago."

"You wanted to pilot a mobile knight, right?" Emma asked.

"Don't paint us with the same brush. That's not what I was about." Beyond telling her that he'd admired knighthood itself, he didn't go into specifics. Instead, he described how his dream shattered. "I couldn't become a knight, but I did become a mobile knight pilot," he began. "I was first assigned to a platoon like this one—captained by a knight."

Eating pizza, Molly added, "You were part of a mobile knight squadron with a fleet of ships, right? Larry's a total slacker now, but he used to be a real serious pilot people expected a lot from."

"Really?!" Emma couldn't believe it.

"Yeah. He was put in that knight's platoon 'cause he graduated from pilot school with top marks. Weren't you?"

Larry's expression was unreadable. "That's right," he said after a pause.

Given how sulky Larry was now, Emma couldn't imagine a time when he'd been serious and skilled. "You were *that* good?"

"Only as good as a regular soldier can be. I was a kid with big, idiotic dreams

back then—like you are now. That’s why I had such a stupid admiration for knights.”

“How is that stupid? Don’t talk about your dreams like that.”

Although Emma’s response clearly annoyed Larry, he moved on. “Anyway, my commander back then was a piece of shit.”

“Huh?”

“He called all the pilots who weren’t knights ‘cannon fodder’ and treated us like trash. If it benefited him, he sacrificed pilots without a second thought.”

“Th-that’s...” Emma couldn’t say a knight from House Banfield would never do such a thing. She couldn’t claim that every knight was a good person. She *knew* there were bad ones, after all. In the academy, she’d learned that the military police arrested knights every year.

Larry’s expression twisted with hatred. He must’ve been remembering his commander. Lowering his head, he continued, “Back then, I still believed every knight other than him was decent, so I reported him to our superiors. Can you guess what I was told?”

When he raised his head, a dark smile on his face, Emma couldn’t answer. “U-um...”

“The company commander I reported him to—another knight—said, ‘We don’t need soldiers who won’t listen to knights.’ My commander knew I’d ratted him out, and he punished me for it on his own authority. Harassed me plenty after that, too.”

Larry had been talented and committed; people had expected things from him. However, that experience had robbed him of his admiration for knights.

Was his commander one of my upperclassmen at the knight academy? Emma couldn’t help asking herself. *No. Given Larry’s history, he was probably from somewhere else.*

Larry wouldn’t have been working with knights raised in Lord Liam’s domain,

but ones who'd drifted to House Banfield from elsewhere. The house never had enough knights, so every year, they hired tons from wherever they could. Lately, more were graduating from the domain's own academy as well. Since those knights were inexperienced, though, the ones in positions of authority were almost all foreign. Telling Larry that probably wouldn't sway him, though.

"You should stop idolizing knights too," Larry told Emma. "They're not all noble heroes."

Emma clenched her fists on top of her thighs. "I know. But I still want to be a knight of justice like *him*."

Larry sighed at her stubborn insistence. "Then just keep it to yourself, would you? If you keep saying that kind of stuff in another squad, you're just gonna be made fun of."

"I don't care! Wait—why're you assuming I'll be assigned somewhere else?!" Larry had spoken as if it were a given that Emma would leave the Melea.

Doug agreed. "Of course you will be, kid. The Melea's where you go when you don't belong anywhere else. It's not a place for a special little knight like you."

"Don't act like this is already decided! We aren't the ones who'd make that choice in the first place!"

"Exactly. The brass up top won't want you staying with a crew like ours, kid. One of these days, they'll move you somewhere more fitting."

Doug and Larry seemed to think she'd eventually be transferred as a matter of course, since she possessed rare-enough skills to serve as a test pilot for a special prototype's development.

Molly was moved to tears by the idea—or by all the alcohol in her system. She clung to Emma, wailing, "You're going to a different squad, Emma?! Don't leave!"

"I'm not!" Emma replied, panicked. "Stop crying! Everybody's giving us weird looks!"

She had to console Molly until they decided to turn in for the night.

As she waited for Molly to stop weeping, Emma thought she sensed someone eyeing them. She twisted her head around, looking for the source of the feeling.

“Huh?”

“What is it, kid?” a red-faced, drunk Doug asked suspiciously.

“Nothing... It must’ve been my imagination.”

I thought I felt someone watching... But I must just have imagined it, right?

A group of three women left the bar and, in an alleyway, opened a terminal to make a report.

“We got the info on the target knight, Commander.”

The terminal displayed a “sound only” icon rather than the face of the person they’d contacted. *“What’d you find?”*

“Our assessment is that there’s no need to worry about her. She’s just a kid with stars in her eyes.”

“She’s pretty young, right?”

“Yes. We almost laughed out loud listening to her. She started going on about her dream to become a knight of justice.” The women laughed as they made their report.



Once she heard the report, however, their commander's attitude changed. *"Stars in her eyes indeed,"* she said, voice low and cold. The women were shocked for a moment, but the commander swiftly ended the conversation. *"Very well. Return at once."*

"Y-yes, ma'am."

The call ended, and the women exchanged a glance.

"Was the commander a bit strange just now?"

"Maybe she was just in a bad mood."

"Y-yeah, I guess she might've been."

Normally, the commander's reaction to a simple report was never that extreme. The three women could do nothing but wonder what had provoked such a reaction.

Although Emma had heard a bit about Doug and Larry, the night ended without her learning anything about Molly, whom she felt a lot closer to. The next morning, she decided to hang out with Molly. They went shopping on the town, just the squadron's two girls, excitedly browsing the items displayed in shop windows. They were a little boisterous, eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Isn't that incredible?! You don't see stuff like it all the time!"

"It's great! That's a rare find, Emma!"

Passersby around them gave the two overexcited girls strange looks. It wasn't their behavior that was mystifying, but the items they were perusing so enthusiastically.

"That mobile knight is the same model as the Avid!" Emma babbled, looking through a window. "Avid models that don't match House Banfield's special configuration are rarer than rare! You can find garage kits of them at House Banfield, but I hear you hardly ever see them elsewhere. Makes sense that

they'd have them here, though, since the Seventh developed the Avid. The model's ridiculously accurate, too! Ah—I want to buy it and display it back home!”

They were looking at a plastic model of the Avid—the mobile knight cherished by House Banfield's count. This Avid wasn't modeled after *his* unit, though—it was gray and metallic. “Avid” wasn't even the model's original name, just the nickname the count three prior to Liam had given his personal unit. The Seventh Weapons Factory officially changed the model's name to the “Avid” to pay homage to the exploits of that pilot, Liam's great-grandfather Alistair.

Next to Emma, Molly pressed her hands and face to the glass, staring at the items arranged inside.

“A standard unmodified Avid model is crazy rare, right?! That thing would go for ten times the price on Hydra, don't you think? I mean, it's still pretty pricey here, but...”

When they looked at the model's price, their shoulders slumped in unison. Alistair's original Avid had been in action centuries earlier, and this plastic model was likely from quite a while ago too. The display placard explained that it was no longer manufactured and was priced significantly higher than it had originally been.

“It costs an arm and a leg. But if I don't buy it here, I might never get another chance!”

Emma had just spent a ton the night before, so she had to fold her arms and consider the treasure before her carefully. After some serious thinking, though, she eventually made up her mind. “I'm buying it!” she declared. “Buying it, putting it together, and displaying it on a shelf at home! I want to see it next to my model of Lord Liam's Avid!”

Noticing Emma's determined expression, Molly clapped with an awed “Wow!” But although she cheered her friend's decision, she cocked her head, realizing Emma had said something strange. “Wait, Emma. Is there a plastic

model of the Avid's *current* build? I heard the count never approved one to be sold, not even a garage kit. They're supposed to be real strict about that too. You...didn't build the whole thing from scratch, did you?"

When Molly asked whether she'd personally constructed the model, Emma smugly explained how she'd come by it. "They actually *were* sold for a bit. But it's a practically mythical kit you could only buy for a few months."

Molly covered her mouth with both hands in envy. "I'm so jealous!"

Thinking back on that purchase, Emma really felt blessed with good fortune. "I spent everything I had and bought three," she bragged. "I want to go back in time and pat myself on the back!"

Far from being put off, Molly was genuinely impressed. "You're amazing, Emma! That's the stuff of legend!"

Before she and Molly left, Emma went into the model shop and bought three of the rare Avid kits. She looked happy, but also rather pale.

"What's wrong, Emma?" Molly asked worriedly. "Was there a problem?"

"I impulse-bought three again, but I've really spent too much already this month. I'll have to pay in installments... And, looking at the payments, I'll have to be frugal for a little while..." She should just have bought one, but she got greedy, so she'd have to cut back a little for the next few months.

Molly wasn't quite sure what to say. "I-I see. Sounds rough. Should I treat you to lunch...?"

Her suggestion was tempting, but Emma *was* still the Third Platoon's commander. "I'm really happy you offered, but...but...I really don't feel like I can let a subordinate treat me!"

"I think you're making too big a deal of it. You covered plenty of things last night, so let me return the favor a little."

Emma almost cried with happiness at her companion's insistence. "Thank you, Molly!"

As the two made a scene in front of the store, an attractive woman with an exasperated expression walked up, unable to leave them be. They'd seen her somewhere before; it was the woman who'd been looking at the Raccoon.

"You'll cause this store trouble, making a scene in front of it," she cautioned them.

Noticing how many eyes were on her and Molly, Emma blushed and hurriedly apologized to the woman. "I'm really sorry!"

The woman smiled. "You don't need to apologize to me. I've seen you before, though, haven't I? I think we were browsing new mobile knight models at the same time." Still smiling, she cocked her head.

"Oh. Yes," Emma said.

"Being energetic is good, but you should be a bit more composed as well."

"Ah ha ha...I-I'll keep that in mind." Emma smiled wryly. The woman looked her over from head to toe appraisingly, which made her a bit uncomfortable. "Um, what is it?"

"I was just curious about something. I've set it aside, though. Don't let it bother you."

"O-okay...?" Emma scowled.

The woman chuckled. "I just thought you were cute."

"C-cute?! Oh, no, not me..." Emma protested. Her face bright red, she waved her hands in front of her.

Smiling, the woman gestured with her thumb toward a nearby sidewalk café. "If you've got some time, want to chat a bit? I'm...interested in you."

"I-in me?" Emma turned to Molly, her eyes asking her friend what to do.

Molly didn't seem to give it much thought. "Why not? If she's inviting you, maybe she'll treat you."

Emma blanched at the suggestion. "That's rude, Molly!" Although her

companion's suggestion mortified her, she was the one holding a bunch of big bags with plastic model kits inside.

The woman seemed to find that incredibly amusing. "Don't worry, I'll treat you. I invited you, so you can both order whatever you'd like."

The other two exchanged a glance—Emma embarrassed, and Molly thrilled.

"We'll take you up on that, then."

"Way to go, Emma!"

The woman took the two into the sidewalk café, and they got a table. They must've come off as a strange group; the woman had such a mature allure that the two girls didn't look like they could possibly be her friends. They immediately drew the attention of the people around them—only temporarily, of course. Everyone who turned to look at them quickly lost interest in whatever the trio was up to.

Emma ordered a drink. Once the server brought it, the woman introduced herself. "You can call me Siren, all right?"

"Er...Miss Siren?"

"Just Siren is fine, Em."

Emma sipped her drink through her straw, embarrassed by the nickname Siren gave her. She felt like the older woman was mocking her. She glanced over at Molly, but the other girl was completely focused on the huge parfait she'd ordered, and Emma concluded resignedly that Molly likely wouldn't join the conversation.

Siren turned toward Emma, giving her an intrigued look. "You're a knight of House Banfield, right?"

"Oh. Yes, I am."

"Are you here on a mission?"

“Oh, well, um...” That was a military secret, so she couldn’t answer.

As she floundered, Siren apologized. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that. You *are* a soldier, even if it’s just in a count’s private army.”

Emma was relieved that Siren relented so quickly. “No, I can’t say why I’m here,” she confirmed. “Sorry.”

“That’s fine. What I’m interested in is you personally.”

Emma pointed at herself, cocking her head. “Me?” Why would the beautiful, mature woman in front of Emma be interested in her? Janet’s face flashed into her mind for a moment, flustering her terribly. “Er, I’m, um, not interested in women...in that way...” She averted her eyes, trying to think of how to refuse Siren’s advances.

Siren just gave her a wry smile. “Don’t worry. I’m not into women in that way either. There was just something about you I was curious about.”

“Curious about?”

Siren continued to smile at her. “I wanted to know why a cute girl like you became a knight.”

That was when Emma finally realized that Siren had somehow guessed that she was a knight. “How do you know that, anyway?”

“I took a stab in the dark. I was a knight once myself, for a different family. I know how hard a job it is, which is why I’m curious.”

When Siren said she’d been a knight, Emma immediately believed her. She certainly had an air like she’d been in a lord’s service at some point. “You were? Who do you serve now, then? Are you a knight of the Empire itself?” Perhaps Siren served the nation directly. That was Emma’s guess.

Siren almost laughed at the idea, however. “Is that what I look like?”

“Y-yes. I mean, you just...have such mature composure.” Emma pictured the strongest knights she knew. *Lord Liam’s in a different category altogether, but Instructor Claudia is the only other knight Siren reminds me of. They both have a*

mature femininity. It's so cool.

Claudia, who'd been Emma's instructor, was the strongest knight the girl knew. But to Emma, Siren was just as dazzling.

Siren's eyes dropped to the table. "Thanks, but I don't serve anyone right now. You could say I'm enjoying the freelance life." Plenty of knights chose not to serve a lord, and they commonly sold their services to whomever they pleased.

"Freelance? Why don't you serve anyone?" asked Emma, whose intuition told her that Siren was a more capable knight than she was. *She looks way stronger than me. I'm sure she could work for whoever she wanted to.*

Siren gave her another smile. "Well, I'd like to say it's a secret. There's no profound reason, though. I guess I just prefer being on my own and doing whatever I want."

"I-is that so?" The knights Emma admired served a lord, and she didn't really understand Siren's way of thinking. She recognized that everyone had their perspective, though.

Leaning forward to show her interest, Siren asked, "So? Why did you want to be a knight?"

Emma was flattered that Siren was interested in her, but she couldn't help feeling like her dream was incredibly insignificant. "I'm sure you won't think my answer's interesting once you hear it." Everyone she'd told had ridiculed her over it; she was sick of people's reactions.

"You shouldn't talk about your dreams and aspirations like that. I won't laugh. Won't you tell me?" It was almost exactly what Emma had said to Larry the night before.

Having the tables turned embarrassed Emma. "Y-you're right. Well, I really... admire my lord, you see."

"You mean Lord Banfield? The count?"

“Yes! He’s so strong... When I was a kid, he seemed like a hero to me. I wanted to become a knight who fights for justice, just like him.” Emma described her dream with a bright smile, but her expression darkened when she recalled her string of failures lately. “I just keep screwing everything up, though. I can talk about my dream all I want, but I’m not getting any closer to it. However hard I work, I feel like I don’t take a single step toward who I want to be.”

“No one would ever have to work for anything if everything just went fine from the beginning,” Siren soothed her.

“Huh?”

“It’s wonderful that you’re working toward a goal. Now, all you need to do is succeed so majorly that you blow away all your failures so far. Do that, and you’ll be one step closer to your ideal.”

“B-but—”

“Being a knight who fights for justice sounds amazing. You should keep chasing that ideal of yours. Even if people laugh at you—” Siren suddenly covered her mouth as if she herself was surprised by what she was saying, although the smile she’d worn before quickly returned. Yet Siren now looked a little embarrassed, which created a cute contrast to her mature, composed air a moment earlier.

“What’s wrong?” Emma cocked her head.

Siren looked even more bashful. “I’m sorry. I remembered something I have to do. I apologize, but I have to go. I wish you the best of luck, though, Miss Knight of Justice.”

Siren stood and rushed off somewhere.

“That was nice—what she said to you,” said Molly, who’d finished her parfait at some point. She’d stayed quiet the whole time, though; she must’ve thought it would be rude to interrupt their conversation. Still, she looked pleased that

Emma's expression was so much sunnier now.

"Yeah..."

"She was kind of cool, wasn't she?"

Unlike Emma, Siren practically oozed mature charm. It was enough to make Emma hope she'd come off that way herself one day.

"She was so cool. Do you think I could become an impressive knight like that one day?"

Molly scratched her cheek. She evidently thought that might be difficult. "I don't know. I think you're more the cute type, personally."

"Cute?! But as an adult, I want to end up cool!"

When Emma said that, Molly laughed. "We all have things we're good and bad at, I guess."

Emma looked hard for Siren, but there was no sign of her anymore. Still, she wanted to thank the woman. She smiled in the direction Siren had gone, a hand on her heart.

Thank you, Siren. I'll try harder. One day, I'll be a knight just like you, Emma silently informed the older knight she'd only just met.

Chapter 6:

Private First Class Molly Burrell

AFTER PARTING WITH SIREN, Emma and Molly continued shopping. When evening came, they headed to a restaurant for dinner.

They would both have been somewhat uncomfortable anywhere too chic, so they picked a more casual venue. It was an old, small place, but it was clean and charming. It seemed to be run by a couple, a woman cooking in the back and a man waiting the tables.

Emma and Molly sat down and observed the couple with fascination.

“Amazing. All the food looks homemade,” Emma said, awed as the woman stir-fried a dish she’d also prepared herself.

Molly agreed. “Most places just put the finishing touches on the food these days. I’ve got to say, though, I like places like this.”

“Yeah, me too!”

They’d chosen a table near the wall, where they sat across from one another. As they observed the kitchen—an unusually complete one for their era—they also enjoyed chatting. The two both liked mobile knights, so they’d hit it off quickly, and had been fairly close ever since they met.

Still, Emma didn’t know that much about Molly. That was partly because she was aware that Molly was an orphan. After hearing that she’d grown up in an orphanage and joined the military soon after, Emma hadn’t been sure whether to ask more about her past.

She snuck a glance at Molly. The girl smiled easily, and always seemed like she was having fun, but what kind of past might she have had? The knight was curious, but she couldn’t ask.

Molly noticed her gaze and returned it. “Something wrong?”

“Er...no, it’s nothing.” Emma hesitated for a moment, then decided that she didn’t want to ruin what they had now by prying into Molly’s past.

Molly just gave her a probing look. “Let me guess. You’re curious about my past or something, right?”

“How’d you know?!”

Seeing Emma’s shock, Molly explained why she’d drawn that conclusion. “Well, you found out all that stuff about Doug and Larry’s histories yesterday. I figured I’d probably be next.”

“O-oh.”

“Also, you tend to show what you’re thinking on your face. When something bothers you, it’s totally obvious.”

“What? It’s *that* bad?” Learning that her face showed more emotion than she realized, Emma flushed in embarrassment.

Molly giggled at her reddening cheeks before she continued, a melancholic look on her face. “I don’t think my story’s all that interesting. Do you still want to hear it?”

Emma thought for thirty seconds or so before biting her lip and nodding firmly.

Molly gave her a small smile, then schooled her expression. “My earliest memories are in the orphanage,” she told the other girl. “I remember people there saying they didn’t know anything about my parents either.”

“I see...”

Molly looked away. “But you get that kind of comment both when people really *don’t* know anything...and when they decide it’d be *worse* for the kid to know.”

“Huh?”

“I’m assuming my parents fell into the latter category. People at the

orphanage were always kind of awkward about the subject right up until I left.”

In short, they’d decided that it would be better for Molly’s future if she was in the dark about her parents. That shocked Emma, who’d grown up in a warm, loving family. She couldn’t believe that a friend of hers had lived in such circumstances. She had no idea what to say to Molly.

However, the girl herself didn’t seem particularly bothered by it. She looked almost happy as she chattered, her hands clasped. “Oh! I actually have pretty good luck, though. I hear orphanages weren’t even a thing until a little while ago. I’m only alive today thanks to our lord.”

“Thanks to Lord Liam?”

“Yeah! Orphanages were one of his reforms after he took over. That’s why I don’t hate him, like Doug and Larry do... Of course, it’s not like I’m a fan or anything either,” Molly laughed.

Emma clenched her fists atop her knees. No, Molly didn’t hate Lord Liam like Doug did. She didn’t seem to think much about him to begin with, as if she felt that he was from another world, and there was no point even considering him.

That made Emma a little sad. She wanted Molly to be more thankful to Lord Liam, but when she thought about how challenging just making it this far had been for the other girl, Emma really couldn’t criticize her. If anything, she felt like she was selfish to want Molly to appreciate her role model.

“I see... Well, I’m happy to hear that you don’t hate him.” Just knowing that Molly could stand the count Emma admired so much comforted her.

“Since I like tinkering with machines, I became a mechanic. Being in the military really was hard. I don’t hate the way things are now so much, though. I think my life’s at least more comfortable than it was back in the orphanage.”

Watching Molly reflect on this with a big grin, Emma had to acknowledge that the mechanic hadn’t assumed her lax, carefree attitude without thought. Molly didn’t say anything about it, but her life in the orphanage *couldn’t* have been all

smiles. Despite that, Molly acted cheerful all the time, which spoke to emotional strength that Emma was forced to admit surprised her.

“I didn’t know you had such a hard past...”

“Well...I didn’t really compare it with anyone else’s, so I don’t know how hard it was. And I’m pretty happy now, since I get to work on mobile knights. Oh—our food’s here. It’s my treat tonight, Emma, so eat up!”

By the time their food arrived, Molly was basically done talking about her past, and Emma didn’t want to probe further and unearth anything dark. Part of her wondered whether it would be a mistake not to learn more, but the other part of her felt she’d already overstepped.

“All right,” she said with an awkward smile. “Thanks, Molly.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Chapter 7:

Joint Development

IT WAS NIGHT ON THE EMPIRE'S Capital Planet—the *whole* planet, since it shared a unified time zone. At that time, it should've been dark, but the capital was a densely packed megalopolis. Vehicle lights sped through the streets and sky, and illumination spilled from skyscrapers packed tightly on the planet's surface. Each individual light was small, but the sheer quantity of them brightened the night almost as much as the sun did.

In a bar atop one skyscraper, someone sat at the counter, looking down at a drink. Swaying their glass changed the color of the liquid inside from red to blue. If the glass continued to move, the color kept changing.

The individual looking down at the glass was a young man. His appearance suggested that he hadn't quite grown into an adult, but his attitude was confident. He sat in the high-class bar without a shred of awkwardness, as though he truly felt he belonged there.

It was no wonder, since the bartender *was* there solely to serve him. The young man was the only customer. You could even say that the bar was only open for him. If anyone else tried to enter, his armed guards at the entrance would politely turn them away.

There were other people in the bar to attend to him as well. They observed him carefully to anticipate his every need and want; he never had to open his mouth to voice them.

Music played in the bar, but when the young man received a call on his terminal, a staff member silenced it. The young man set his glass down and answered the call, displaying a screen before him.

"Didn't think I'd hear from you at a time like this."

"I apologize for interrupting your leisure time, but I decided it would be best to

contact you for a decision on this matter as soon as possible."

"It's fine." The young man picked up his glass again, watching the screen with his drink in hand. "What's wrong?"

"The Third Weapons Factory wishes to cancel development of the special unit."

The young man sighed when he heard that report. "The Third wants to pull out?"

"Yes, Master. The military has informed us that the factory is considering canceling the project, since it is unlikely to turn a profit. They suggest a large price reduction on the weaponry we plan to purchase from them in the next year by way of apology."

The woman onscreen was expressionless, but had distinctive red eyes. Wearing a maid uniform, with her long, glossy hair in a ponytail, she carried on the conversation dispassionately.

"They sure gave up quick."

"Lady Eulisia believes that a factional dispute within the Third Weapons Factory is behind the decision."

"They're having a little faction war at my expense, eh?" The young man frowned, irritated at the idea, but quickly smiled. "Well, who cares? As long as I don't get shafted, it's not a problem."

The Third Weapons Factory was at least apologetic enough to offer him several ships and mobile knights he'd planned to purchase. Receiving those for free would put a lot of extra room in his budget for the next year. If the special unit's development was canceled, he'd obtain something of greater worth in exchange. The Third Weapons Factory's deference was proof that they weren't taking him lightly.

"You wish to suspend the project, then?" the woman on the screen confirmed with him.

“No, that’d be boring,” the young man said, although it would’ve made perfect sense to let them freeze the project. He downed the contents of his glass and set it on the counter, then asked the woman, “The special unit was tested at the Seventh, right?”

“Yes, Master.”

“...Get me Nias.”

In the mobile knight development facility on Asteroid Neia, the limbless Atalanta was still secured by an arm in the hangar. In front of the craft, a fierce argument was taking place.

A red-faced Percy berated a group that had just barged in. “Why do I have to work with the Seventh to repair the Atalanta?! Her reactor is top secret Third tech!”

Her superiors hadn’t ordered the cancellation of the project, but its continuation, under certain conditions. Percy and her team had been thrilled at the news, but hearing what those conditions were ruined their cheerful mood.

The first requirement was that they produce results. They already planned on that, of course, so it was easy enough to accept.

The second was that they make the craft viable as a weapon. Regardless of whether it was a “special” unit, it was currently usable for too small a pool of pilots. At the very least, it had to be accessible for skilled pilots, and Percy’s team had orders to collect data to that end. They accepted that condition easily as well.

There were several other conditions, but the one Percy simply couldn’t accept was joint development alongside the Seventh Weapons Factory.

While Percy fumed, Nias merely checked the Atalanta’s data on her tablet, looking blasé. She had a lollipop in her mouth, and her brow furrowed slightly as if she were upset.

Yes, Engineering Major Nias Carlin herself had been summoned to repair the Atalanta.

“I wasn’t exactly free myself, you know,” she told the irate Percy exasperatedly. “I wouldn’t be repairing this defective thing with my precious rare metals if it weren’t an order from *him*.”

Even the Seventh Weapons Factory’s “Mad Genias” had someone she couldn’t defy.

Listening to their argument, Mag—who’d been dispatched as Nias’s aide—shrugged and looked up at the Atalanta. “What’s the point arguing if this is what the top brass decided? If we’ve got orders, let’s hurry up and start the job already.”

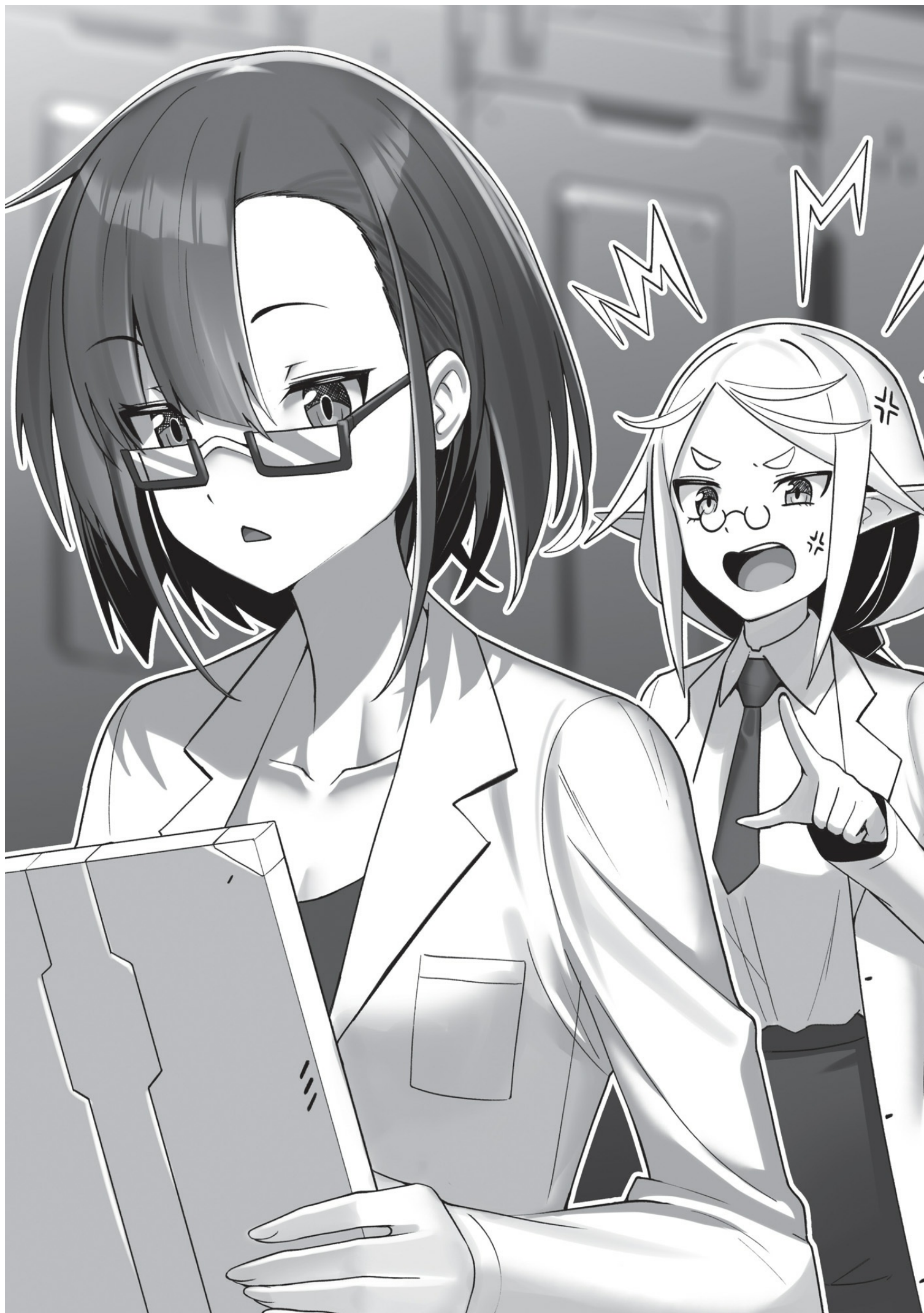
Percy looked irked at being admonished by a dwarf. Even if what he said was perfectly reasonable, she couldn’t tolerate it emotionally. “I can’t accept this!” she bellowed. “How much blood, sweat, and tears do you think we poured into her—into the *Atalanta*’s development?! Why do the stupid people at the top always make these nonsensical decisions?!”

Now that Percy was badmouthing her superiors, Nias seemed not to even want to engage with her anymore. She went back to the data in front of her, planning the craft’s repair. In short, she dismissed Percy.

Percy couldn’t bear this, and pestered Nias directly. “Don’t just ignore me!”

Deciding to humor her in Nias’s stead, Mag tried to move things along, placating Percy. “We get it, we get it. Let’s just decide what to do with the basic frame for now, all right? Your Nemains are slender, since that’s trendy these days, but they lack a little sturdiness. Why don’t we make this model a little thicker, huh?”

To Percy, Mag’s suggestion to change the basic frame of the mobile knight felt like a slight against the Nemain. If they changed the frame, it wouldn’t even be a Nemain anymore, would it?



“You’ve got to be kidding me, you *dwarf!*”

As Percy’s scream resounded through the hangar, Nias just looked over data quietly. She was completely unperturbed, as if the commotion right beside her didn’t even register as background noise.

In her perusal, she stumbled upon some data she found fascinating. She’d been scrolling quickly through it all, but swiftly stopped and began reading much more closely.

Well, this is interesting... It was the data on Emma Rodman, the pilot who’d boarded the Atalanta. After looking carefully through the data, Nias got an idea. *Hmm. That’d limit our options for improvements to the craft...but it seems like this job will be more fun than I thought.*

Nias began to chew through the lollipop in her mouth, suddenly a lot more motivated to work on this prototype.

At the same time, the Melea was undergoing repairs, but the end was in sight on that project. There were no longer any issues with the craft’s appearance. Its basic frame hadn’t changed, so its appearance was similar as well, but the wear and tear was gone; all the plating was brand new. A significant amount of work had been done on its internal machinery as well.

Engineers and mechanical arms were still at work inside the ship. Watching the repairs from a building in the dock, the Third Platoon members discussed the Melea’s new look. Emma displayed the ship’s data on the window in front of them.

She was shocked at what she saw. “These specs would match any mainstream modern ship. Some parts would actually surpass them.”

Comparing the Melea’s new specs to average ship specs in the Empire, the Melea indeed came out on top in several areas.

Although Emma was impressed by the improvements, Larry only responded

with snide commentary. “Goes to show how long it was neglected, right? I’m shocked it’s still in service at this point, actually. I can’t help feeling like they’re saying there’s no point giving us a *new* ship. I mean, why even keep the Melea in service now?”

Were they just repairing the old ship to save money? It apparently seemed that way to Larry.

Of course, Molly didn’t care one way or the other. Regardless of the reasons for the Melea’s improvements, she was just excited to see them. “Isn’t it nice when your living space gets an upgrade? The messroom was so gross—so much stuff was falling apart everywhere. Personally, I can’t wait to see it.” Simply having their living spaces improved would be a comfort to the crew.

Nonetheless, Doug seemed to have misgivings about the upgrades. He looked at the Melea with his arms crossed, a skeptical expression on his face. “I can’t trust any of those specs until I actually see ’em in action. Besides, the thing can only fit half as many mobile knights on board now.”

As a light carrier, the ship’s purpose was to transport mobile knights, so reducing the number of units it could transport *should’ve* been a problem. The repairs actually seemed to shift the Melea away from that function.

Emma explained the change. “Well, development on the Atalanta will continue, so they added a facility for that. Hence the reduced space. There was also something about this being a trial run for an experimental engineering ship.”

When Doug heard that, his mood soured further. “So, our Melea’s supposed to be some guinea pig?”

“Nobody’s saying that, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Molly interjected. She must not have been able to remain silent, given that this would involve her. “The Atalanta’s a special Nemain, and the Melea didn’t have facilities to maintain it before. We never had that many mobile knights anyway, so I don’t think it really matters if we reduce space for

them.”

The Melea had originally had room for four companies, but only two were actually stationed there. Nine platoons comprised the Melea’s full fighting power, so even with less space, the actual number of fighters aboard wasn’t changing.

Still, Larry seemed just as upset as Doug. “At any rate, the Melea’s value as a carrier has dropped. That shows how little the guys in charge expect of us. They just do whatever they want, don’t they? First, they say they’re canceling the project. Now they’re suddenly getting it going again.”

Larry seemed to assume their superiors were thinking, *Instead of buying a new ship for this project, just use an old one that should probably be retired at this point.*

Molly glanced at another ship from the border region security force. It had been deemed irreparable and was being dismantled. “I heard the escort ships are getting everything changed out too, but the Third’s looking after those. The Melea will be the only ship left manufactured by the Seventh.”

Larry clasped his hands behind his head. “Can the Third give us some mobile knights, too? Nemains are stronger than Moheives—even the models that aren’t intended for knights.”

Unlike Larry, Doug didn’t seem to want to pilot a Nemain. “Nemains are too geared toward knights. I prefer normal mass-produced units. What’s most important is that they’re sturdy and consistent. Slender mobile knights like that seem unreliable to me.”

“The Nemain’s got plenty of history as a mass-produced unit, so isn’t it good enough? Don’t a mobile knight’s insides outweigh how it looks?”

“That’s why I’m saying I want a reliable mobile knight instead of a Nemain. They’re all about looks.”

The pair tended to get heated when they talked about mobile knights. They

were growing louder, and neither was relenting on his stance one bit. Since those two were busy, Molly decided to talk to Emma. The topic was, of course...

“I’m glad they decided to keep developing the Atalanta. It’s great that you can keep piloting it, Emma!”

“Yeah!” Emma nodded happily.

She was thrilled that development hadn’t been canceled. She’d even cried in happiness when she heard the project was resuming. She had no idea why the people in charge had decided to continue, but she didn’t care.

“I’ll make sure the Atalanta is a success!”

That was Emma’s main concern at the moment—helping to perfect the craft in front of her.

On the Phiet Mercenaries’ ship, Siren stood before a mercenary squad dressed in black space suits. The red-eyed, black-haired woman looked over her subordinates.

“Are we ready?” she asked.

They smiled and nodded.

“There are no problems. But how long will you stay like that, Commander?”

At her subordinate’s question, Siren smiled bewitchingly. She hid her face with her hand, and in the gaps between her fingers, her eyes changed color to dark green. Her hair changed color from the roots as well, ending up light silver.

Standing there was Sirena, who’d been going by Siren—the commander of the Dahlia, not the Phiet, mercenaries.

Having resumed her original appearance, Sirena gave her subordinates orders once more. “Our goal is to capture or destroy the target mobile knight. We’ll get a bonus if we capture or kill its pilot too. The only problem is, we can’t come back to the Seventh afterward. The reward for the job is good enough to make

up for that, of course. We've got an extra request from the client too." She concluded by revealing that request: "They want us to sabotage the Seventh Weapons Factory."

Her subordinates smiled beneath their helmets. They knew who the client was and what the circumstances of this job were.

"They want to take their rivals down a peg?"

"They're making too much money lately. That's got to stop, I guess."

"The Capital Planet's weapons factories really play dirty."

Donning her own helmet, Sirena raised a hand to silence her gossiping subordinates. "We've got to produce results, since we're utilizing the Dahlia Mercenaries' main force. When the plan commences, the main force outside will strike as well, just as we outlined. Make sure you time the retreat right."

Her subordinates put their work faces back on. "What will you be doing, Commander?" one asked her.

"Taking independent action. I've got a personal objective, after all. While I'm at it, I suppose I'll kill the pilot and get that bonus."

The client had promised an additional reward if they killed the pilot, but that wasn't the only reason Sirena was after her.

The man who made the request called himself River. I wonder if he's got some personal grudge against the pilot. That'd be strange, since she seemed like the kind of girl you'd find anywhere.

Sirena pictured Emma. She couldn't imagine the young woman was any sort of threat. The only impression Emma had made on her was as an ignorant girl pretending to be a knight. She lacked experience and knew nothing of the world—Sirena had made contact with her personally to confirm that, and couldn't fathom finding Emma ominous in any way. Still, something about her had irked Sirena beyond belief.

She was so carefree. I can't stand her type. Thinking the world is beautiful,

admiring knights, preaching “justice” ...It pisses me off just picturing her.

The darkness inside Sirena couldn't forgive Emma's ignorant pursuit of justice. At the same time, she remembered giving Emma advice when they'd spoken, though she had no idea why. She supposed she'd just chosen things the girl likely wanted to hear in order to get closer to her, but her words to Emma had disturbed Sirena herself for reasons she couldn't fully explain.

Sirena frowned, aggravated. *I can't let that stupid conversation rattle me.*

For some reason, she'd seen her old self in Emma, and couldn't accept that. She desperately wanted to show the ignorant girl how the world worked.

I'll torture that naive knight of justice to death myself.

Under her helmet, Sirena's deep green eyes seemed to darken a shade.

Having finished checking on the Melea, the Third Platoon members took a vehicle back to their lodgings.

“It seems like work on the Melea will be done soon,” Emma mused. “We'll have to start moving our things back onto it.”

Surprisingly, it was Doug who responded to her attempt to spark a conversation. “I'll have to stock up on drinks and snacks, then. Looks like things'll get busy soon.”

“You're gonna go back to stockpiling food and drink like you run a bar, Doug?” Molly asked, exasperated.

“Do you really do that?!” Emma demanded in shock. “I understand bringing a little bit, but you can't have a *stockpile* on board! Get snacks from the canteen like you're supposed to!”

There were limits to the personal belongings crew members could bring on a ship, given the limited space. To make matters worse, Doug planned to bring nothing but luxuries.

Doug apparently had no intention of relenting, though. He even retaliated by hitting Emma where it hurt. “You’re one to talk. I hear you bought three plastic models, kid. Maybe you have your own private room, but that shouldn’t mean you’re allowed more personal belongings than the rest of us.”

“Th-that’s...” Emma glanced at Molly.

The mechanic gave her an innocent look. “I might’ve told him you bought some premium plastic models. He was a little concerned about your femininity. Right, Doug?”

Doug gave Emma a worried look. “I know this won’t mean much coming from me, but you should try finding other interests, kid.”

“Wh-who asked you?! And what’s wrong with liking plastic models anyway?!” Emma shouted.

Just then, there was a huge explosion somewhere in the asteroid colony. From their perspective, it seemed to have occurred somewhere near the ceiling.

Larry, who was driving, hurriedly stopped the car. “What was that?!”

The four glanced around. Then a colony-wide alarm began to blare. *“Everyone in the residential area, please head to your designated emergency shelters. We ask that you remain calm and proceed in an orderly fashion. I repeat—”*

Marks directing them toward the shelters appeared here and there in midair.

Doug got out of the vehicle. His eyes widened at the vibrations he felt go through the ground. “An accident? No, this shaking isn’t... Is the weapons factory under attack?”

As Doug decided the situation hadn’t stemmed from an accident, a message appeared on Emma’s terminal. It ordered all House Banfield personnel to return to their ships immediately.

Molly checked her terminal too, but the Melea was still in repairs. “They’re telling everyone to go back, but what are we supposed to do?”

Larry was ready to drive. “Get ourselves onto an allied ship,” he replied. “If we don’t get out of here, we’ll just be caught up in whatever this is and die!”

They didn’t know whether this was an accident or an attack, but if someone had targeted the Seventh Weapons Factory, they had nothing to do with it—at least, that was Larry’s judgment. He was eager to leave immediately without getting wrapped up in a fight that had no bearing on them.

Emma had a sinking feeling, however. “Doug, get in! Larry, drive!”

“R-right.”

“What’re you—?!”

Doug dove back into the car. Before he even closed the door, Larry drove off. He’d noticed something.

The vehicle, which had been driving on the ground, floated upward a bit. Then its tires withdrew, and it lifted. It was a transport that could travel on land and in the air.

Looking behind them, Doug and Molly spotted a small, round, legless mobile knight speeding toward the vehicle.

“What idiot brought a mobile knight into the colony?! Where’s that craft from, Molly?”

“How should I know?! I mean, it looks like a modified mass-produced unit, but... Hm? Wait a second. Isn’t that one of those craft that attacked you before, Emma?!”

“You just noticed now?!” Larry asked incredulously.

He used the vehicle’s smaller size to outmaneuver the mobile knight. Thanks to his judgment and skills, the other craft couldn’t close the distance between them easily.

Larry really is a good pilot, Emma thought, watching him. But there’s no time to admire that now. If that enemy is part of the group that attacked the Atalanta, then...

She considered their motives. Since they'd attacked the prototype during testing, there was only one thing they could be after. *They're targeting the Atalanta! We have to go get it right now!*

Sitting in the passenger seat next to Larry, Emma told him, "Change of plans, Larry. Please take us to the Atalanta's hangar immediately!"

"What?! Why?! Just leave the thing! It's not even done yet!" He seemed shocked that she would worry about the Atalanta at a time like this.

Emma, however, was sure the attackers were after the special unit. "Take us right away, if you don't mind!" she insisted.

"Damn it! Why'd this have to happen now?!"

Though he wasn't without complaints, Larry headed toward their new destination. The mobile knight pursuing them seemed to run out of patience, however. It aimed its submachine gun at them and fired with no regard for whatever obstacles were in its way. The buildings around them crumbled as shots struck them, and a few bullets raced right past the vehicle, which shook around the passengers.

"Hurry!" Emma shouted.

"I'm going as fast as I can!"

Larry weaved the vehicle through the surrounding buildings, fleeing the enemy craft.

Sirena let the vehicle get away, then opened her mobile knight's cockpit hatch.

"Is this far enough?" asked the subordinate in the cockpit with her.

"This is good." Sirena stretched, preparing to leap down from the craft, which was floating above a building. "Now they'll lead us to the target. Okay. You can handle the rest?"

“Leave it to me.”

Sirena jumped from the mobile knight. She fell the thirty-meter distance and landed easily. The cockpit hatch closed, and the mobile knight—a Buckler—flew off. Activating her powered suit’s stealth mode, Sirena blended into her surroundings and disappeared.

“Well, Emma, I’ll count on you for directions,” she murmured.

She raced after the vehicle the knight was in, leaping from rooftop to rooftop and sometimes descending to the road to chase it. At the speed she was running, she could easily outpace the average vehicle.

Finally, she saw the car enter a large hatch.

“That’s it, eh?”

Before the hatch closed fully, Sirena leaped inside, infiltrating the hangar.

“Well, I think I can expect to get that bonus.” Underneath her helmet, Sirena smiled bewitchingly.

Chapter 8:

The Battle on the Asteroid

TAKING COMMAND ON the bridge of one of House Banfield's ships, Claus sought more information on what was occurring.

"Where'd the attackers come from?" he asked an operator.

They had no details. "Unknown! The Seventh Weapons Factory's defense force is in disarray. The one thing that's clear is that they invaded the asteroid from outside!"

So, even the Seventh Weapons Factory didn't have information beyond the fact that they'd somehow allowed themselves to be invaded.

Claus put a hand to his chin, considering the situation calmly. *It's risky to attack one of the Empire's weapons factories, even if it's only under partial government control. They're making an enemy of the Empire itself by doing this. I'd like to think space pirates aren't stupid enough to pull something like that... But if this group understands how idiotic this attack is, then it'll be trouble.*

A fleet of over ten thousand ships defended Asteroid Neia. After picking a fight with one of the weapons factories supporting the Empire's military, you wouldn't remain unscathed. Even space pirates with huge fleets normally avoided attacking weapons factories.

"So, there's fighting on the asteroid?"

"Yes, that's confirmed."

Claus nodded. "What's the defense force doing?"

"Moving. They seem to be having a rough time fighting, though. This is their home base, after all."

The Seventh Weapons Factory had forces to defend itself with, and those trained regularly, but they didn't have adequate experience in real battle.

Without that, they couldn't make the best calls to deal with the situation, despite all their training and superior equipment. To make matters worse, they lived on the asteroid. So long as they focused on avoiding damage to their home while they fought, they'd be at a disadvantage.

It is hard to imagine anyone attacking this place. Still, it doesn't make sense that they're so unprepared after being attacked.

Claus could believe that the defense force's guard had relaxed somewhat, but not so much as to let the enemy onto the asteroid. If anything, their guard should've been up, given that the Atalanta had been attacked during a test.

"Deploy the landing force under my command inside the colony. Half the knights as well. Have the other half prepare to deploy in mobile knights, on the double."

The operator was surprised to hear Claus's orders. "*Can* we interfere, sir?"

Sending their own armed forces into the weapons factory didn't exactly communicate a good message, even if they did so to assist the defenders. It might also confuse things. Claus understood that, but still decided to send his troops in.

"I'm sure the Seventh won't like it, but let them know we're sending our landing force. I'll take responsibility."

"Head knight" of the fleet might've been a ceremonial position, but it gave Claus a certain authority. The amount of military might a lieutenant colonel could wield was limited, of course. That was why he'd only sent in forces under his direct command. He'd also judged that he didn't have time to convince any other units to act.

"Y-yes, sir!"

Finally, Claus sought to determine the whereabouts of the most powerful individual under his command. "One more thing. Get hold of Chengsi."

Emma and her platoon burst into the hangar where the Atalanta was being repaired.

Nias was working there. She grimaced at their sudden intrusion. “Could you keep it down a little?” The Mad Genias had apparently continued to work even while alarms went off.

When Doug realized that, his face twitched. “Guess there’re lunatics wherever you go. Who the hell would just keep plugging away in a situation like this?”

It was thanks to Nias’s decision to do so, however, that the Atalanta’s repairs appeared more or less complete.

Molly pointed at the prototype behind the glass. “Look! The repairs seem almost done! This might actually work out!”

The Atalanta’s appearance prior to the Third Weapons Factory reinforcing its joints had been restored, and there didn’t appear to be any other big changes to the model. If anything, it looked like it’d been reverted, not upgraded.

They could see Percy, Mag, and other engineers around the Atalanta as well, all of them still working.

Emma strode to Nias and explained the situation with as much calm as she could muster. “Enemies breached the asteroid! You have to evacuate!”

When Emma urged her to leave, Nias just sighed. She didn’t even make eye contact with the knight. Glancing behind her, she said irritably, “Why should I take orders from you, huh? Besides, you’re the ones who brought the enemy *here*.”

“Huh?”

Emma turned around to see what Nias was looking at and spotted the air rippling. A figure coming out of stealth mode slowly became more visible—a woman in a pilot suit. All the Third Platoon members jumped back in surprise. They’d never even realized they were being followed.

The woman gave Nias a surprised look, then said, impressed, “Looks like the genius has got some guts. More than *this* one, at least.”

Cold sweat running down the back of her neck, Emma drew her weapons. She stepped in front of everyone, her handgun in one hand and her laser blade hilt in the other. “Everybody get back!”

Seeing Emma rush forward like that, the woman scowled behind her tinted visor. There was anger in her voice as she addressed Emma. “You act like a knight, even though you’re powerless. Very well. I’ll play along with you.”

The woman stepped forward unarmed. Emma fired, and a laser shot from her gun, but the woman predicted its trajectory and dodged it.

Behind Emma, Nias said, “Can you do this somewhere else? You’ll wreck our equipment.”

Emma had no time to humor her. She materialized her weapon’s blade and slashed at the woman, but her foe grabbed and twisted her arm. “Ugh!”

“So weak. House Banfield’s not a threat if they call people like *you* knights. I suppose you’re the best they could train on short notice.”

The woman rammed her knee into Emma’s gut, then slugged her three times in succession before sending her flying. It all occurred in a split second; Molly, Doug, and Larry just stood there dumbfounded.

Emma tried to stand, but the woman grabbed her by the hair, lifting her up.

“D-damn you!” Emma was still resisting. She felt like she sensed some kind of pain in the woman’s expression through her tinted visor.

“This is where you die,” the woman said coldly.

Emma shuddered. The woman flattened her hand and brought it toward Emma’s face.

“Aha! *There* you are!”

Before the blow could land, another woman appeared, cutting down the door

to the hangar. Emma recognized the woman and her knight's uniform, which had been modified to resemble certain traditional clothing.

It was the Bloody Devil. She had clawlike weapons equipped on each hand, both already red with blood. Blood splattered her face as well. Evidently she'd already fought at least one person on her way here. The way she smiled with amusement, covered in red like that, made the name "Bloody Devil" truly suit her.

Emma's attacker had stopped for a moment when the Bloody Devil appeared, but she swiftly hurled Emma away from her and drew her weapon. The next instant, Emma saw the two women close the distance between them in no time at all and begin slashing one another.

The first woman apparently knew this sudden interloper. "I didn't think House Banfield employed the Ally Killer. I guess when you're not picky about who you recruit, you can take on some real nuisances!"

The Bloody Devil—Chengsi—laughed and cocked her head, a gesture that sent a wave of fear through everyone there. Doug and Larry were rooted to the spot; Molly's legs had given out under her, all the color draining from her face.

Chengsi seemed interested in the woman she was facing off against. She'd apparently decided to enjoy chatting with her enemy before cutting her down. "So you know of me. You move very well, don't you? I might just enjoy this a little."

"You deviant." The first woman wielded a typical double-edged sword, and Emma was surprised to see that she fought in a rather standard knightly style. On top of that, she seemed very experienced.

She and Chengsi traded blows at an incredible speed. Emma could follow the fight, but she could never hope to imitate their movements herself.

This is amazing. I wouldn't even be of any help...

Chengsi's attacks were unpredictable, but the other woman's well-honed

swordplay could deal with them. Chengsi didn't seem concerned in the least, though. If anything, she appeared to be enjoying herself as she licked her lips.

"You're good... Incredible, really. I see why your forces trusted you so much."

At that, the woman leaped back and raised her sword, ever-so-slightly out of breath. "What'd you do to my forces?"

Chengsi waved her clawed arms like a bird or a butterfly. The gesture left her wide open, as if she were inviting the woman to attack her. She didn't stop at visual provocation. "They gave me all kinds of information when I carved them up. A couple were real tough, so I even had a little fun. Let's see... I think the strongest was a cute little spear user. She fought to the end, believing in her dear commander. It really brought a tear to my eye."



The woman threw something that exploded with a loud bang and bright flash, filling the room with smoke. As she attempted to flee, Chengsi swung her claws, and the woman's blood flew through the air.

"What was that? What just happened?!" Molly asked through a coughing fit.

"M-my ears..." Larry groaned, covering them.

Doug had his guard up, weapon drawn, but Emma knew that the enemy had already fled. She stood and ran to Chengsi. "Th-thank you for saving us."

Chengsi just sighed, looking down at her claws. She could tell from the blood on them that she hadn't dealt her enemy a fatal wound. "She got away... That's too bad."

"Er..."

Chengsi ignored the flustered Emma and began to leave the hangar, then stopped and put a hand to her ear. She must've been communicating with someone.

"Yes, she got away. Sorry, Claus."

Evidently, she'd been operating under Claus's orders.

Even she listens to the head knight, huh...?

As she listened to his directions, Chengsi glanced over at Emma. "They're safe. I saved them, just like you told me to." Apparently, it was Claus who'd ordered Chengsi to defend them. "What do you want me to do next...? Got it. Just kill all the enemies inside. Yep, leave it to me."

Done communicating with Claus, Chengsi turned and began to leave the room. Emma saw her smile before she was out of sight.

"Hee hee! Oh, I'm going to have fun slicing up everyone left," Chengsi said on the way out, a bounce in her voice and step. She seemed truly excited, like a little kid going out to play, in off-putting contrast to her appearance. No one said a thing to her until she was gone.

The next person to speak did so with unconcerned irritation. “Ugh. The room’s a total mess. You can bet I’m charging you guys for the damages.” Nias alone was completely unruffled by Chengsi’s intrusion.

“I didn’t think they had a monster like that stationed here.”

Sirena took off her helmet and held her side, stabbing a needle into the flesh near her wound. The drug lessened the pain and sealed the injury, but she’d been cut deeper than she’d thought, so some discomfort remained. Sirena grimaced at the feeling, then remembered that Chengsi had cut up her subordinates. She ground her teeth in anger.

Switching gears, she pulled out her terminal. “Status updates?”

Reports came in from her subordinates.

“Commander, House Banfield deployed a landing force. We can’t continue the mission.”

“I’ll kill that bitch after what she did to Marco!”

“Chengsi Sera Tohrei is here, Commander! House Banfield employs her now. Be careful!”

Listening to the reports, Sirena realized things hadn’t gone well. She could sense the damage Chengsi had likewise dealt to her subordinates.

“I’ve already run into her and sustained an injury,” she declared. “I want to steal a mobile knight to get away. Can someone find one near here?”

One of her men sent her data indicating that a precious craft was being transported close by. The subordinate who’d acquired the data gave her the details. *“They’re trying to evacuate a custom-made unit. That’s the one closest to your current position, Commander. It’s been activated for transport, so if you can grab it, you’ll be able to use it as is.”*

Leaning against a wall, Sirena broke into a pained grin. “It had to be *that* craft, huh? Well, it’s not my type, but it’ll have to do.”

At the same time, in the hangar where the Gold Raccoon was stored, a pilot affiliated with the Seventh Weapons Factory tried to open the craft's hatch to board it.

"Can't believe they're making me evacuate this luxury craft at a time like this."

The pilot had been ordered to get the Gold Raccoon off the asteroid, since they couldn't let it be destroyed. Despite complaining, he was still trying to get inside the cockpit to fulfill his orders. As a custom craft, however, the Gold Raccoon was somewhat tricky even to start up. Activating it required a number of steps, and in fact, the pilot hadn't even gotten the hatch open yet.

"Okay, I can force boot it from outside, then use the manufacturer pass to open the hatch—"

When he'd finally gotten the annoying machine running, he heard a voice.

"Thanks."

"Huh?"

The pilot turned around, but by the time he'd noticed the person standing behind him, he was already plummeting to the floor. Thankfully, he wore a pilot suit, so he wasn't injured.

He stood and yelled, "Hey, what're you doing?!"

Ignoring the pilot, who had no idea what was going on, Sirena sat in the cockpit seat and took control of the craft. With a small smile, she closed the hatch and ensured the mobile knight was functioning correctly.

"This thing's not half-bad. I like everything other than its appearance. Maybe I should just continue the mission in this baby."

She at least had to destroy the Atalanta. While she was at it, she intended to put down that girl who annoyed her so much, Emma.

Around that time, Emma received orders from Claus. *“Lieutenant Rodman, evacuate the Atalanta at once.”*

“Head Knight?”

“We got some information from an enemy our landing forces captured. Their objective is to destroy the Atalanta.”

“I knew it...”

Emma’s guess had been right, but she hadn’t been able to do anything except let Chengsi save her on Claus’s orders. That gave her a complicated feeling.

“We’ve got info from the Seventh that one of their mobile knights was hijacked. You’re in danger where you are now. Evacuate your squad as well.”

Percy objected fiercely to Claus’s order to evacuate the Atalanta. “What does an amateur like you know?! If we could just evacuate the thing, we wouldn’t be in trouble!”

Despite being yelled at, Claus responded calmly. *“I heard the repairs were finished.”*

“You think it can just run on the same software after so many modifications?!” Percy asked as if he was a complete idiot. “It’s not the hardware that’s a problem. It’s the software!”

Even if the craft itself was complete, it couldn’t be used without the software to control it.

“You don’t need to pilot it. Just move it to the port—”

“That’s too far! And if any enemies are nearby, we won’t be able to use the roads!”

As Percy argued with Emma’s terminal, Nias walked up, sticking her hand into the pocket of her lab coat. “There’s a hatch leading outside here too. All we need to do is put the girl in the mobile knight and toss the thing out there, as

long as you can scoop her up.”

Claus considered that for a few seconds, then made his decision.

“Understood. I’ll send out a squad to secure the craft and pilot. Lieutenant Rodman, I know what I’m asking isn’t easy, but I want you to make sure we get the Atalanta out in one piece.”

“Yes, sir!”

With a salute, Emma began preparations to board the prototype. She closed the call and was heading toward the lockers to change when Nias stopped her.

“Wait.”

“Yes?” Emma turned around.

“Where’d you first learn to pilot a mobile knight?” Nias asked listlessly.

Was this really the time or place to ask something like that? Emma cocked her head, but figured she might as well answer. “Er...from a simulator an old arcade got in.”

“It didn’t have assist functions, did it?”

Emma thought back to the simulator she’d used so long ago. “That was back when I was a kid, so I don’t really remember... But I remember it was hard to control.”

It was a fond memory now. A man carrying a sword had brought a simulator into an old, practically dilapidated arcade in her neighborhood. He’d been strapped for cash, and Emma remembered the arcade manager saying that he regretted buying the simulator. He’d complained about the man with the sword constantly, calling him a “damn swindler.”

It had been difficult just to get the mobile knight in that simulator to walk. It was far too complex a machine for a kid to play like a game. At first, everyone wanted to try it, but since it was no fun, they lost interest in no time. The arcade owner had been excited to market the machine as a “real simulator you can play like a game!” so he was unbearably disappointed when his plans didn’t

work out.

One child *did* play with the simulator, however: Emma. Only Emma, who admired knights, kept trying it as a way to get a taste of piloting a mobile knight. She visited day after day, slowly but surely becoming able to move the simulated craft.

At first, she could barely do so at all. It took months to get the mobile knight to do anything basic. By the time she mastered walking, running, jumping—when she could really say she’d gotten the hang of moving the craft—she’d started to see the fun in piloting a mobile knight.

In hindsight, Emma was surprised that she’d stuck with that simulator so long. At the time, it had seemed like playing rather than training. Now, it was nice to remember challenging the simulator so many times without giving up.

When she heard what Emma had to say, Nias’s disinterested expression slowly changed. A small smile formed on her face, and she gave Emma a look like she’d finally found something interesting.

“Um...?” Nias was giving her *such* a fascinated look that Emma didn’t know what to make of it.

Nias was as nonchalant as ever. “You *are* interesting, aren’t you? Well, there’s no time, so you’d better be off.”

“O-okay?”

Watching Emma rush away, Nias looked down, smiling to herself. She looked truly amused. “Seems like we can reuse that system without any issues.”

Chapter 9:

The Gold Raccoon

SIRENA HAD BROUGHT the Gold Raccoon into the hangar of the Dahlia Mercenaries' ship, where they connected it to countless cables.

Changing into a new pilot suit, Sirena returned to the hangar. "How long until we can deploy?" She floated through the zero-gravity space.

A mechanic caught her, replying, "Ready to go anytime, ma'am."

"Thanks."

Once the cables were removed, Sirena got into the craft's cockpit.

The mechanic gave her a slightly nervous look. "You're really going to continue the mission?"

"I wouldn't call it revenge for my fallen men or anything," Sirena replied, adjusting the mobile knight. "But I need to blow off steam before we retreat, or it'll affect my next job."

She wasn't after revenge. This was all just for the job's sake. The way she looked at it, balancing out the damage Chengsi had done to her men was the least she could do. Besides, if she and the Dahlia Mercenaries came back from this request having achieved no results whatsoever, it'd hurt their reputations. A mercenary's reputation was their worth; it undeniably influenced their future contracts.

"While I'm at it, I'll test-drive this baby."

The mechanic gave her an exasperated look. "Well, that thing's one hell of a mobile knight, however it looks. I think they spent way too much money just to customize a mass-produced unit."

"I wonder exactly who it was made for."

Sirena closed the Gold Raccoon's hatch, and the mechanics left its side. They prepared the craft to deploy, then fired it out of the hangar using a catapult.

"I'll kill you this time."

The knight named Emma had gotten even further under Sirena's skin than she realized. She wasn't even conscious of assuring herself that she wasn't letting personal feelings impede her mission.

Having changed into one of the Seventh's pilot suits, Emma sat in the Atalanta's cockpit, gripping the control sticks.

Percy, who was serving as operator, explained the situation. *"The craft itself is fine, but in terms of its software, we had to cobble something together. Don't expect to do much with it."*

"Understood."

"Concentrate on making contact with your allies, Lieutenant... If you run into the enemy, just flee. Got it?" Percy sounded insistent. She was likely remembering how Emma overloaded the craft during their last test.

Emma braced herself. *"Got it." I won't make the same mistake this time!*

Percy smiled, relieved by her answer. *"Careful, okay? Remove the Atalanta's lock."*

At those words, the arm securing the Atalanta in the hangar freed the mobile knight. Confirming her control of the machine, Emma made the Atalanta walk. The process was awkward, but she managed it.

"This'll work. I just have to rendezvous with our allies," she told herself, heading toward the hatch leading outside—to space.

The hatch opened, and she exited to find the Seventh's defense force awaiting her. They would serve as her escort.

"The defense force will guard you, Lieutenant. Go ahead and meet up with

your allies.”

Just as Emma mused that she could easily convene with House Banfield’s fleet this way, an alarm rang inside her cockpit.

“The enemy? Above us?!”

She looked up and saw a group of those small mobile knights heading toward her. They were firing at her; around her, bullets and beams rained down. She saw ships too. A destroyer with the Seventh’s defense force took beam fire and exploded.

The impacts around the Atalanta propelled it this way and that, and Emma couldn’t keep it on course very well. She moved the control sticks and pressed the foot pedals, but the mobile knight merely floundered in space.

“I’ll hold out until my allies get here! Just you wait!”

As the small mobile knights flew toward her, she did her best to flee. The enemy knights completely ignored the defense force, heading straight for her, so they were clearly after the Atalanta.

Emma activated the twin boosters on her craft’s back and started to feel gravity in the cockpit. The Atalanta fled, and the small craft pursued. Emma was just zigzagging, unable to control her mobile knight as she wanted to, and she worried that she couldn’t get away like this. Her irregular movements seemed to confuse the enemy, though. She continued to run until...

“Ha! Look at these small fry!”

House Banfield’s mobile knights arrived to save her. The mass-produced craft moved to protect the Atalanta, commanded by a captain Emma could identify. Recognizing the voice coming through her comms, she broke into a big grin.

“Captain Duffy!”

“How you doin’, Emma?” Janet greeted her, confident enough to wink. *“Just wait. We’ll clean these guys up quick.”*

Janet was commanding four platoons of three craft each, and the twelve

mobile knights swiftly attacked the small enemy craft.

“Don’t underestimate House Banfield, mercenaries!”

Janet’s craft sped at an enemy and thrust a physical blade into it. She pierced the cockpit easily, and the craft exploded.

Watching her, Emma was entranced. *Amazing. So this is what an A-rank knight is capable of.*

Janet was without question an ace pilot, and all her squad members were clearly skilled as well. They picked the small craft off one by one. The enemy units were effective for their size, but their power didn’t compare with more standard-size mobile knights. Seeing their allies destroyed one by one, the remaining enemy craft fled as fast as they could.

Witnessing that, Emma sighed in relief. “I’m saved...”

“You’ll die if you drop your guard on the battlefield,” Janet warned. *“Until you reach the mothership, stay focused.”*

“Y-yes!”

Now escorted by twelve friendly mobile knights, Emma had been thinking that all she needed to do was reach the allied ship. She’d relaxed some, surrounded by reliable defenders, but put her guard up once more as she waited for the mothership.

Then the Atalanta’s sensors detected an enemy.

“Another one?! Captain, an additional enemy is approaching!”

Janet seemed to think Emma was mistaken. *“My radar doesn’t show—”*

A moment later, however, Janet’s craft detected an enemy as well. Her squad raised their weapons and angled their bodies downward.

“It’s coming from below! Wha—?!” There was no enemy beneath them.

“No! The enemy’s—” Emma began, before a friendly mobile knight was stabbed from behind and exploded.

Her other allies all turned in its direction and saw a gold-painted Raccoon. They'd heard a report that the custom mobile knight had been stolen from the Seventh; it was already registered as an enemy craft.

The ease was gone from Janet's manner. *"Where the hell did that thing come from?!"* she barked, brow furrowed.

Janet aimed her rifle and fired, but the bullets went straight through the Gold Raccoon.

"There's no way!"

Emma's other allies also attacked, but their optical fire went through the enemy craft as well.

A message came from Percy. *"The Gold Raccoon has a function that confuses sensors. If you don't want to die, get moving!"*

Hearing that, Janet swiftly ordered her forces, *"Spread out!"*

Janet's mobile knight grabbed the Atalanta and sped off. A second later, their allies began screaming one after another.

"H-help—!"

"Show yourself, you damn coward!"

"Where are you, tanuki?!"

In her cockpit, Emma listened to their screams, watching space light up with explosions. She couldn't stop trembling at the sight of her allies disappearing one by one. "What do we do?!" There must've been a solution to their situation, but she couldn't think of anything.

When the eleventh craft was destroyed, only Emma and Janet were left.

Janet tossed the Atalanta in the direction their allies would come from and raised her weapon. *"Just let our forces take care of you, Emma!"*

"Captain? Wait!" She reached out with the Atalanta's arm.

Janet's craft turned its back, however. *"I've got to at least take revenge for my*

men, don't I?" She was trying to act as bait to let Emma get away.

The Gold Raccoon must've been listening to their radio chatter. Appearing before Janet's mobile knight, it opened a comm link with them. *"I don't mind letting you get away. You're not my target,"* its pilot told Janet.

The voice was somehow familiar to Emma. Recalling a recent shopping day, she realized where she'd heard it. *"It's you!"* She pictured Siren, who'd encouraged her.

Siren just laughed mockingly. *"You finally realized? You really are slow. Is that why you go on about nonsense like knights who fight for justice?"*

"Why're you doing this?"

"I only got close to you for my investigation's sake, but you blabbed on and on about your dream to me. I was doing all I could to keep myself from flipping out."

As Siren laughed, Emma shook with anger. Realizing that Siren had been mocking her back then filled her with shame and frustration. She felt ridiculous for admiring the woman's maturity. *I can't believe I thought she was so impressive...*

As Emma ground her teeth, Janet attacked the Gold Raccoon. Avoiding the attack easily, Siren began to toy with Janet. The knight was an A rank, and an incredibly talented pilot, but she was powerless against Siren. Emma couldn't contain her shock at that sight. *She's toying with the captain?!*

She could hear the pair talking.

"You'll be facing me!"

"Why? You could just run away and live."

"Well, I'm a knight, aren't I?!"

That was hardly an answer, but it didn't faze Siren. *"I just can't understand people like you. I get avenging your comrades, but just because you're a knight, you have to fight a battle you can't win? You should be more careful with your*

life.”

“Keep talkin’!”

Janet threw away her rifle, slashing Siren with her laser blade. The Gold Raccoon just kicked her craft away, destroying the arm holding the weapon.

Emma already foresaw the worst possible conclusion to this fight. “Just leave me and run away, Captain! At this rate, you’ll—!” At this rate, Janet would die.

Although Emma yelled at her to escape, Janet refused. *“Do I look like the kind of woman who’d just leave an ally behind? I am still an ace, you know!”*

She was doing her best to sound strong, but Siren wasn’t relenting. She kicked away Janet’s now weaponless craft and moved behind it.

“You’re acting tough when this is all you’ve got?”

Siren landed her next attack on the legs of Janet’s mobile knight, severing its limbs one by one with the huge axe the Gold Raccoon carried.

As Janet was effortlessly toyed with, all Emma could do was watch. “Captain!”

Janet knew there was nothing she could do to win now. *“Man, I screwed up,”* she told Emma. *“Sorry, Emma, but could you apologize to the commander for me? Tell him I feel bad that I couldn’t work for him for longer.”*

A moment later, the Gold Raccoon’s fist hit Janet’s cockpit, and the video feed from the cockpit cut out.

“Captain Duffy!” Emma screamed, but there was no response.

What she heard instead was Siren’s voice. Compared to when they’d visited the café together, it was ice-cold. *“Because ‘she’s a knight’? What an idiot. Seriously. Knights are just pawns for the nobility. They’re all pride and stubbornness. They don’t even know that the nobles they work for are scum. I truly can’t understand fools like her.”*



Siren kicked Janet's craft aside and pointed her rifle at the Atalanta. *"You think so too, right?"* Her voice was low as she sought agreement, and Emma imagined that Siren might kill her instantly, depending how she answered. *"Knights are just pawns. To the nobles who wield them, their lives are disposable. You agree with me, don't you?"* There was hardly any emotion in her voice.

Emma was terrified of her, but... *"Y-you're wrong."*

Siren didn't respond.

"At the very least, my lord isn't like that," Emma continued. *"He's an incredible person who puts his own life on the line to fight for his people... He's my role model! He's nothing like how you say he is!"* Rejecting her opponent's words, she gripped the control sticks with trembling fingers.

Siren's voice came back to her, awfully cold. *"Then die pathetically for your pride."* The moment she squeezed the trigger...

"Lieutenant Emma Rodman, it's finally ready."

As Nias's face appeared in the corner of Emma's monitor, something happened to the Atalanta. Small windows popped up everywhere onscreen, informing Emma that her craft's systems were updating.

"Major Carlin?!"

Emma pressed the pedal in surprise, and the Atalanta took off in a spin. It was able to avoid bullets that way, forcing the enemy to chase after it.

They were in the midst of a battle, but Nias went on without a shred of concern. *"Sorry, but time is tight, so I'm going to adjust the software right now."*

"Wha...?"

Emma barely had time to process what Nias was telling her before Percy cut in, shocked. *"You're rewriting the system midbattle?! What're you thinking?!"*

Nias's timing was unthinkable, but she was unperturbed. *"I'm just calibrating*

things for the lieutenant."

"That's crazy! There's no way! She's in the middle of a fight! Stop being stupid!"

"I'm smarter than you, at the very least. You can hardly call me stupid. Anyway...ready, Lieutenant?" Nias stared straight at Emma through the monitor.

She nodded. "Yep! I can do this!"

"Good answer."

For a split second before her image disappeared, Emma saw Nias smile. Then her picture was replaced by the system display as the system itself was rewritten. Emma couldn't understand most of the data, but looking over it, she realized one thing—she remembered seeing some of that text in the simulator back in the arcade.

"This system..."

"It's based on one from a certain special unit," Nias explained, using sound only. *"I'm adjusting it for the Atalanta."*

When the system activated, the Atalanta began to change. Its twin eye cameras flashed, and its spiraling trajectory straightened. The craft's response to the updated system astonished Emma. *Wow! It's completely different from a second ago!* The mobile knight's reactions seemed more in line with Emma's instincts now.

Siren noticed the changes as well. *"She rewrote the system midbattle? This is why I hate geniuses. I should've killed her back then."*

As the Gold Raccoon approached, the Atalanta stopped fleeing. Emma headed toward Siren, drawing the laser blade from her craft's side skirt. She slashed at the enemy, who hastily avoided her attack.

"Damn you!" Siren was obviously uneasy. The Atalanta must've been faster than she anticipated.

Emma, on the other hand, was just thinking about how she'd attack Siren next. "You'll pay for what you did to Captain Duffy!"

A moment ago, their positions had been reversed, but now the Gold Raccoon was the one trying to flee. Its rifle shot at the Atalanta, but couldn't land a shot, given the other craft's superior speed.

"Tch!"

Siren had managed to steal the Gold Raccoon, but it was evident that it hadn't been adjusted well enough for her use. Speeding toward the enemy craft, the Atalanta brought down its laser blade, but...

"Ugh!" Emma pulled the Atalanta back.

The enemy craft had raised its arms to defend against the attack, which had apparently been the right call. Its pilot, though confused herself, laughed. *"Ah ha ha ha ha! What is this thing?! I heard it had special plating, but it can take a direct hit and come out unscathed?"*

Siren was cackling in her cockpit because Emma's laser blade had failed to burn through her armor. The Gold Raccoon was completely unharmed by the attack.

Siren seemed to regain some of her calm. She was going back on the offensive. *"Time to break this thing in by breaking you."*

Chapter 10:

Overload

IN A SEVENTH WEAPONS FACTORY development room on the Asteroid Neia, Nias rewrote the Atalanta's programming. Surrounded by nine screens, she worked on them all at once, onscreen text flying by at incredible speeds. Nias checked each screen instantly, rewrote its contents, and then made revisions as needed. Moreover, she did all that in the middle of battle. All anyone around her could do was stare in slack-jawed awe.

She was displaying mind-bending talent, but Nias herself seemed to consider it nothing special. "This is no good... This'll be fine with some adjustments... This one..." She rewrote the program, checking the Atalanta's movements and data in real time.

Seeing Nias's skill right before her eyes, Percy was envious. "Real geniuses are something else. I didn't think she'd create a whole new program out of nothing under these conditions."

Her jealous tone didn't bother Nias. She heard the same every day. People always envied her, hated her, and impeded her. Nias was only here now because she'd overcome all that on the way.

"I didn't create it out of nothing. I'm just reappropriating something that already exists. Even I would have a hard time creating all this from scratch."

Percy felt faint terror at the fact that Nias didn't say she *couldn't* do that. She tried not to show that feeling on her face, since she had her pride. "Something that exists? That doesn't make any sense. The Third designed the Atalanta, and our whole design philosophy is different from the Seventh's. How would you adapt something to it?"

"It's not the craft I adapted it to," Nias replied as she continued working. "It's the pilot."

“You’re making even less sense now.” Creating a system specifically for some unknown pilot was ridiculous.

While Percy tried to wrap her head around it, Nias finished the system. “It’s possible. After all, the simulator that girl trained in was for one of our special units. Although I can’t believe she trained in *that* thing.”

“One of the Seventh’s special units? You can’t mean...”

Nias took out a piece of candy and put it in her mouth, supplying her tired brain with much-needed nourishment. She stretched, smiling from both the satisfaction of a job well done and the expectations she now had for this interesting new pilot.

“I wonder how the heck it got there. I never thought a kid out there would be practicing in an Avid simulator. This is why that place is so much fun.” Nias pressed a button on her terminal. “Lieutenant, listen carefully.”

“Lieutenant, listen carefully. I’ve finished the system for now. It shouldn’t present any problems for you.”

Emma was moving the control sticks furiously inside the Atalanta’s cockpit. The craft had no means of attack, and the Gold Raccoon was rapidly approaching.

“Thank you! But my laser blade did nothing against the enemy! I don’t have any weapons!” Shooting down the Gold Raccoon would be impossible for her, thanks to the craft’s special armor. That was what she thought.

However, its developer—Nias—sighed quietly, sounding truly disappointed. “*You do. I can’t believe I’m saying this... It’ll kill me to see it destroyed by a craft the Third had something to do with.*”

“Please tell me!” Emma pleaded, just avoiding the axe the Gold Raccoon swung down at her.

“It’s customized, but basically, it’s still a Raccoon. Its joints are the same as

any other Raccoon craft. I mean, they're sturdy, but the Atalanta can break them. You just have to get serious."

Emma realized Nias was suggesting she overload her craft. Her earlier failure was still stuck in her mind, though. "B-but—" If she attacked in an overloaded state, she could destroy the Gold Raccoon's joints, but she was hesitating due to her failure in the last test.

Nias saw right through her worries. *"Don't worry. I based the Atalanta's new frame and system off a specific unit."*

"Specific unit...?"

"You're familiar with the Avid, I take it?"

While repairing the Atalanta, Nias had enhanced the craft's basic frame using the same rare metals the Avid contained. The new system was based on the Avid's too, allowing Emma to pilot it.

"Why the Avid?"

"She may look different, but the Atalanta is the Avid's sibling. Let's call her its little sister. A rookie like you won't be able to break her."

Nias's words were mocking, but she was also guaranteeing that no matter how hard Emma pushed the Atalanta, it wouldn't break.

Emma made up her mind. "I'm putting my faith in you."

"Don't need it."

Although Nias rejected Emma's trust, when Emma glanced at her monitor, she thought it looked like the Mad Genias was smiling. Her expression suggested she saw exactly how this would play out.

Emma adjusted her grip on the control sticks. "Lend me your strength, Atalanta."

She pulled the cockpit lever that would overload the craft. There was no hesitation in her movement. The Atalanta shuddered as it overloaded, but

withstood the power this time, its rare metal frame keeping the reactor's excess power in check. Sparks discharged from its joints, but not nearly as many as last time. The craft was utilizing much more energy without wasting it.

Percy and her team had opted to stabilize the craft by releasing excess energy, but Nias had enhanced its frame to use the energy more efficiently. That sounded simple enough in theory, but it was a method Percy and her team had considered and given up on. It was only thanks to Nias's genius that she'd actually accomplished this.

Yellow light spilled from the Atalanta's twin boosters, and heavier pressure than before weighed on Emma. Still, the craft was responding to her.

"I can do this!"

The Atalanta sped toward the Gold Raccoon, leaving yellow light in its wake.

"What *is* that thing?!"

In the Gold Raccoon's cockpit, Sirena was seeing something that baffled her. It was hard enough to believe that the Atalanta was moving better and better as the fight went on, although the Gold Raccoon's superior armor meant Sirena was still at an advantage. Now, however, the practically luminescent Atalanta was somehow gaining *speed*.

"It's faster than the data says. You're not telling me she mastered it this quickly?!"

Information from Sirena's client had warned her about the craft's overload state, but now it was performing *better* than the data had indicated. Sirena thought she could've dealt with the craft if it was just a little faster than it was supposed to be. However...

"My sensors can't keep up with it!"

The Gold Raccoon's fire-control system couldn't capture the Atalanta in its sights, so Sirena wouldn't be able to take it down from a distance. But when she

got close, she had even more trouble. She could swing her axe all she wanted, but the Atalanta dodged easily.

Though it frustrated her, Sirena had to hand it to Emma. “She’s disappointing in person, but she’s a real monster of a pilot.”

She envisioned the girlish knight. It was hard to believe someone so childlike controlled the fiendish mobile knight in front of her. The Atalanta was definitely a threat, but a pilot who could master it was just as dangerous.

“If I don’t crush her here, she’ll be trouble.”

Tossing aside her spent rifle, Sirena switched to the Gold Raccoon’s submachine gun. She kept the Atalanta in place with her fire, then sliced at it; Emma hurriedly dodged.

“Just as I thought—you don’t have enough experience!”

The enemy craft and pilot were both impressive, but Sirena’s combat prowess surpassed theirs. And Emma still had no way to attack, so Sirena retained the advantage.

As the Gold Raccoon chopped with its axe, the Atalanta tackled it.

“Damn you!”

“Got you!”



When the mobile knights made contact, a comm link opened automatically between them, and Sirena heard Emma's voice. The Atalanta accelerated; even in the Gold Raccoon's cockpit, Sirena felt the weight of their speed. The cockpit couldn't fully handle the gravity from the acceleration.

"Let me go!"

She resisted, but the Atalanta didn't budge. *"How dare you kill the captain!"*

"Ha! This is war. People die out here! Though that knight's death was particularly pointless, wasn't it?"

Although Sirena disparaged the enemy ace she'd taken down, she didn't bait Emma into deeper fury. *"The Atalanta was finished thanks to Captain Duffy. If she hadn't bought me time, I'd be dead. It's because of her...that I can corner you like this!"*

Janet's dogged attacks against Sirena had afforded Nias the brief time she needed to complete the craft's systems.

"Ugh!" *If it weren't for her?!* Sirena regretted letting them buy that time now. "Don't get cocky!"

She reached out to destroy the Atalanta, but the other craft grabbed her arm. It held the Gold Raccoon's limb...then tore it off, just like that.

Sirena broke into a sweat. "Monster!" Without an arm, this fight would be much harder.

At that point, some Dahlia Mercenaries rushed to her side.

"Commander, please retreat!"

Dozens of mobile knights bombarded the Atalanta, forcing it to back off from the Gold Raccoon.

"Guess I took a little too long," Sirena remarked. *I got too heated. That isn't like me.* "I'll meet up with the main force."

Her subordinate gave a reply she didn't expect. *"The main force was*

destroyed.”

“What did you say...?”

The Dahlia Mercenaries had over a thousand ships at their disposal. They weren’t all elites, of course. Only two hundred or so were actually reliable. Still, Sirena couldn’t believe that the entire fleet was destroyed so quickly.

“Who took out the main force?!”

She knew that wouldn’t have been easy, which was why she couldn’t believe it had happened. She’d never imagined such a powerful enemy would be here.

“House Banfield. They deployed and attacked the main force. Only fifty or so ships remain.”

“They found where the main force was hiding...?”

Many of the fifty remaining ships had taken damage, so hardly any of the mercenaries’ ships were still unscathed.

Sirena ground her teeth. *I take it they’ve got other annoying people working for them in addition to Chengsi. I didn’t hear about any famous knights joining House Banfield, but I guess I took them too lightly.*

She regretted her misjudgment, but as commander, she still had to give orders. “...Retreat.”

The Gold Raccoon began to withdraw, and the Atalanta stopped pursuing it. Sirena heaved a sigh of relief. At the same time, she was incredibly frustrated.

“I’ll put you down one day. I swear it. Enjoy playing knight until then,” she spat, disgust in her own cowardice welling inside her.

From the Atalanta’s cockpit, Emma watched the enemy retreat. “Why aren’t we pursuing them?!” she protested. “They—that woman—killed Captain Duffy...”

It was Claus she was railing against. *“This was an urgent deployment, and*

we're out of ammunition and fuel," he explained. "If we pursue them, we'll take more losses." He'd already found a fleet he identified as the enemy's main force and wiped them out.

"But...!"

"We're returning to Neia. Rendezvous with our forces immediately."

Emma hung her head. She canceled the Atalanta's overload state and stopped midflight, her craft still gripping the Gold Raccoon's arm. "It's my fault. Captain Duffy was killed because of me..." Her weakness had caused a knight she was acquainted with to lose her life.

When she blamed herself aloud, Claus reprimanded her harshly from the window on her monitor. *"You're mistaken. Do you really think a single knight is at fault for Captain Duffy's death?"*

"But...if I were stronger, she would've made it! Everyone else would have, too!"

"What may or may not have happened isn't up for discussion. I was the one who ordered them to retrieve the Atalanta. I chose the team and sent them to pick you up. If responsibility lies with anyone, it's me."

Emma just looked down, unable to respond.

Claus left her with one final comment. *"You did well."*

Cutting off the call with Emma, Claus turned to speak with the ship's captain.

"She's so young," the captain said. "Getting emotional like that after losing an ally. Still, she's to be commended for not taking off after the enemy on her own."

Claus held the bridge of his nose, lamenting Janet. "I lost a great subordinate. The responsibility is mine, not the lieutenant's."

The captain nodded. "Of course. You're head knight, commander of this

fleet.” The words might’ve been cold, but the captain also added, “Still, your judgment reduced the damage inflicted on the Seventh Weapons Factory. And you destroyed the enemy’s hidden fleet, keeping casualties to a minimum. Desiring better results would be greedy.”

The captain was essentially saying Claus had gained more than he’d lost. After all, deploying his landing force and knights to the asteroid had allowed him to decimate the mercenaries.

Claus looked up. “I just did what I could. This title of head knight...it’s too grand for me.”

“Being humble?”

“It’s how I really feel.”

Shrugging, the captain asked again about the young pilot they’d just discussed. “So, Head Knight, how will you punish that insubordinate lieutenant?”

She’d defied a superior officer, so she did have to be punished. Claus considered it. *For her, it would probably seem harder not to be punished.* Having lost an ally, Emma was lamenting her own powerlessness. In light of that... “I’ll have her complete a special training unit during this mission.”

“Wear her out so she doesn’t overthink things? You spoil the girl.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Playing dumb, Claus projected a few screens before him to determine the extent of their losses. The casualties might’ve been limited, but they’d still had some. One among them was Captain Duffy, who had admired Claus.

A few days later, before the battle debris was fully cleared, House Banfield deployed its fleet to send off its dead. Soldiers donned ceremonial uniforms and saluted the dead, their fallen allies. Emma participated aboard an allied ship, surrounded by knights from other squads.

“Did you hear? The ones who attacked us were a top outfit from a mercenary alliance.”

“Vulture, right? If they were at the top of a group like that, they’d have a few thousand ships under their command.”

“Pretty stupid to pick a fight with the Empire.”

They’d questioned some captured enemy soldiers, and were finding out more and more about their identities. Emma, quietly eavesdropping on the knights’ conversation, waited to hear the name of the squad that had attacked them.

“I guess these mercenaries were called Dahlia.”

“What were they after, infiltrating the Seventh like that?”

“I heard that they were trying to destroy one of our new craft or something.”

It hadn’t been announced officially that the Dahlia Mercenaries infiltrated the Seventh to destroy the Atalanta; the information was already classified. But people talked, and rumors had already made the rounds among the knights of the fleet.

“I heard the group’s leader herself was part of the assault.”

“Is she famous?”

“People here and there know her name from what she’s done in the past. It’s Sirena. Sirena of the Dahlia Mercenaries.”

“That’s probably a fake name, though.”

“How come they picked a fight with us?”

“Well, House Banfield doesn’t hire mercenaries. I guess they see us as the enemy.”

House Banfield didn’t have much information on mercenary groups. They’d never needed to hire any, since they had their own forces.

“Sirena of the Dahlia Mercenaries...” Emma muttered the name to herself quietly. “So Siren was a fake name.” *One day, I’ll make sure I...*

Chapter 11:

What Knighthood Means

“THIS IS THE final test we’ll run from Neia, Lieutenant.”

“Understood.”

In a sector of space near Asteroid Neia used for testing, the Atalanta was undergoing its last test. The Melea, now completely upgraded, supervised.

The Atalanta weaved through rocks floating in space, its agility incomparable to its movements during the first test. It dodged rocks gracefully, aiming a rifle loaded with paint bullets and firing at targets affixed to the rocks.

The Atalanta pulled the trigger, and paint splattered near the center of one target. Seeing that, Percy had a complicated expression. She was obviously happy that the Atalanta was closer to completion, but she evidently couldn’t accept that they’d needed the Seventh’s help to reach that point. The project was finishing up, but she couldn’t let herself enjoy it.

“We’ll deploy mobile knights next.”

“Right.”

Nine training Moheives launched from the Melea, surrounding the Atalanta. They attacked her with rifles and machine guns loaded with paint bullets, but didn’t so much as graze the prototype.

Emma heard the Moheives’ pilots over the radio.

“How’re we supposed to hit this thing?!”

“Our specs are completely different! Is this test really worthwhile?”

“Aw, man... It says I was shot down.”

Emma fired paint bullets into the unenthusiastic pilots’ craft one by one, and the test concluded.

The Atalanta returned to the Melea, finding the hangar a lot less ramshackle than it had been. It was less spacious, but equipped with far more facilities. The difference was night and day, and conditions were much better for anyone piloting a mobile knight from this hangar.

The Atalanta arrived at its personal dock, and Molly fixed it in place with various mechanical arms. *“Good work, Emma!”*

“Yeah...”

Leaving the cockpit, Emma turned in zero gravity to face the Atalanta. She looked exhausted, bags under her eyes.

Molly floated over. “Man, these state-of-the-art facilities are the best! They’re super easy to use, and everything just moves way better! It’s so smooth, I love it!”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed listlessly.

Molly gave her an exasperated smile. “Is it still bothering you?”

“Yeah...”

They’d just been talking about the deceased Captain Duffy, whose death was torturing Emma. She’d seen the older woman as a reliable senior knight. Moreover, Duffy had saved her life.

Molly’s smile faded, and she instead reassured Emma with a concerned look. “There’s no point in dwelling on it. People I knew have died too, and dragging it around with you doesn’t help anything.”

Although Molly’s tone was light, this certainly *was* something she’d been through multiple times already. Emma knew there was a strong core under her cheerful facade, but the young knight wasn’t used to grief yet.

“I know, but I can’t help thinking that if I could’ve piloted the Atalanta better...” She still regretted the battle.

An unexpected individual approached the pair. “Thinking that way is arrogant,” he called to Emma.

Emma glanced at him and saluted. "Head Knight."

Molly must've realized who he was as well; beside Emma, she struck an unpracticed salute too.

In his knight's uniform, Claus floated over, grabbing a nearby railing and planting his feet on the floor. Emma opened her mouth to say something, but Claus spoke first.

"We've decided which mobile knights to station on the Melea," he reported.

"You came all this way to tell us that yourself, Head Knight? Couldn't you just have sent us that information?" Emma found this strange.

Molly clapped. "Hey, you're right!" She was being rudely informal in front of the head knight, but Claus didn't comment on that. He gave Molly a wry smile, then offered Emma a more genuine one.

"That decision just meant I had an excuse to come all the way here. I wanted to talk to you, Lieutenant Rodman."

"To *me*?"

Emma and Claus sat alone in a lounge aboard the Melea, each with a drink in hand. Claus had come all the way to the light carrier to speak with her.

"It's too bad about Captain Duffy," he said.

"Yes..."

"She was a bit lax about regulations at times, but she was a brilliant subordinate. She fought well and displayed excellent judgment in the field."

Since Janet had commanded a company of twelve mobile knights, Claus certainly must have considered her reliable.

A tear rolled down Emma's cheek. "The captain died because of me. To protect me. If she hadn't been there, right now, I'd be..."

Claus rubbed Emma's back. "Her death is my responsibility. Besides, we're soldiers as well as knights. People die on the battlefield. I can't tell you to expect it, but you have to accept it." Their job boiled down to entering such battlefields.

"I'll get revenge for the captain... I'll defeat Sirena of the Dahlia Mercenaries," Emma declared.

Claus lowered his voice. "You mean you'll let your feelings get in the way of your mission?"

"I-I...!"

Claus opted not to tell Emma what she should or shouldn't do. "You're free to behave as you please, but if you act on personal feelings, you'll eventually get people around you hurt. When an ally of yours dies because of your grudge, what will you do?"

"I won't get anyone hurt," Emma did her best to assert, although she couldn't look Claus in the eye.

"It's nice to think that way, but your allies *will* eventually get hurt if you're selfish. And another thing... As long as you're in the military, people you know will die. Are you going to get revenge for every single one?"

"Ugh..." Emma couldn't respond.

Claus rose from the bench. "You can decide for yourself what you'll do. I can only say that, as your superior officer, I hope you'll carry out your mission without getting caught up in revenge."

Emma was silent.

"Become stronger," Claus continued gently. "You have the talent and strength to do so."

She tried to deny it. "I can't do anything."

"You think too little of yourself." Claus crossed his arms. "The military wouldn't give something as pricey as an experimental prototype to a talentless

knight.”

“But I’m weak...” Despite Claus’s words, Emma couldn’t drum up self-confidence.

Claus sighed, giving her a defeated look. “Then get stronger, and move up the ranks.”

“Huh?” She understood getting stronger, but she didn’t see what moving up had to do with her desire for revenge.

“An incompetent commander will lose more allies,” Claus warned. “But a talented commander can actually save lives. If you want to protect allies and comrades, you have to get stronger and earn promotions.”

“Promotions...” She nodded, understanding what he was trying to say. “Yes, sir.”

When she agreed, Claus looked relieved. He launched into the other reason he’d come to talk to her. “Let me tell you what the top brass decided. If someone is targeting the Atalanta, it’ll need to be guarded with appropriate force.”

“Er...” Emma couldn’t quite grasp what Claus was saying.

He gave her a small smile. “We decided to equip the Melea with state-of-the-art mass-produced units.”

Emma jumped to her feet. “You mean...?! ”

“It just demonstrates how much we expect of the experimental prototype and the Melea. I hope you’ll keep giving the project your all.”

The Melea would receive brand-new mobile knights from the Seventh Weapons Factory. Emma’s eyes practically sparkled at the thought.

Finished with his business, Claus made to leave, but Emma called out to his back. “Um...! Captain Duffy wanted me to tell you something. She was sorry she couldn’t work for you longer.”

Claus stopped and looked up at the ceiling, his back still facing Emma. "...I see."

A few seconds passed, and Claus began to speak of Janet. "She was wasted on me, but I know she didn't think so. She expected a lot of me, and said she'd ensure I went even further. She said we should get along, since she expected we'd be together for a long time." Claus's voice sounded like it was trembling slightly. "To think she'd lie to her superior officer like that."

Pilots, mechanics, and all kinds of other crew members gathered in the Melea's hangar on the day they'd receive new mobile knights. They waited around impatiently, spending every moment wondering whether the new craft had arrived yet. The Third Platoon's members were obviously no different.

"Why don't you calm down? Doug? Larry?" Molly stared with exasperation at the restless pair, both of whom were pacing the hangar.

"I'm sure you can't understand this, Molly, but it'll be my *first time* receiving a new machine. How am I supposed to calm down about that?"



Despite all Doug's time in the military, he'd never piloted a brand-new mobile knight. Larry was just as antsy, despite his usually disaffected behavior.

"Didn't you have tons of complaints before?" Molly asked him.

"That has nothing to do with this!"

"Sure," Molly sighed. When she noticed Emma running over from an open hatch, she stood up; Emma waved both hands, a huge smile on her face.

"Emma!"

"Everyone! The mobile knights are here! I got them loaded in quick!"

The air in the hangar brightened swiftly. Although the gathered crew members knew they were receiving new craft, some last-minute adjustments were being made, so they didn't know which squads would get what. The Seventh Weapons Factory had several models you could consider new; some even looked decent.

Larry thrust a fist in the air—an extremely rare gesture for him. "Good job, Commander! Where are they?!" To call Emma "Commander," he must've been in a good mood.

As everyone waited with bated breath, machines were brought in one by one. The crew's excitement slowly died down; of course, Emma and Molly were still just as enthusiastic.

"We got brand-new Raccoons! Those are cutting-edge mass-produced units!"

"This is great, Emma! Good job nabbing them!" Molly hugged her.

"Thanks, but I didn't really have a chance to say anything before they decided!"

A dwarven engineer entered with the craft, his own team behind him. "Hey, everyone. We're supervising engineers from the Seventh. We'll be sticking with you for a bit."

The dev team from the Third lingering around the Atalanta—Percy, in

particular—scowled at the dwarf’s group. “Get lost! What are staff from the Seventh doing here anyway?”

“Well, the Raccoons are cutting-edge, so we’ll supervise maintenance and gather field data. Guess we’ll be on the same ship for a little while. Happy to work with you,” the dwarf chuckled.

Percy turned away. Meanwhile, Doug’s and Larry’s shoulders slumped.

“I just knew there’d be a punchline like this. Couldn’t they have given us anything better?”

“Yeah. Specs aren’t everything. I’d rather pilot something...you know, stronger-looking. I wanted a craft that came off as more masculine...rougher. Raccoons are just so...round.”

Apparently, Raccoons were just as unpopular with non-knights. Their round frames came off as cute rather than rough, and when the crew finally saw what they’d received, they were generally disappointed.

Larry was in denial. “If they’re giving us new mobile knights, they could just have put assist functions in... What’re they called, Teumessas?”

Doug seemed resigned to his fate, but voiced his preference anyhow. “You like sleek craft like that? I wanted a more angular one. You know, something manly.”

So, although the crew had been excited to get new mobile knights, they weren’t too happy about the Raccoons’ appearance. Although their specs were an improvement, the delivery ended up seeming rather underwhelming.

“We got brand-new Raccoons, but everyone’s making weird faces about them.”

In a lounge in one of the Seventh’s docks, Emma was once more talking to Claus.

“My subordinates didn’t like them either,” Claus replied. “They’re not bad

craft, but I had to give Chengsi my Teumessa. She got all pouty.”

“You *gave* it to her?! I heard that hardly anyone who applies for a Teumessa actually receives one!”

“It was a good trade. For me, a Teumessa’s too much to handle—they don’t have assist functions. Raccoons have all the standard functions, so they’re easier to use.”

Teumessas were craft for ace pilots; they were difficult to fly, but Raccoons were highly adaptable craft that could be adjusted for anyone from an average soldier to an ace. Emma and Claus both thought highly of the model, but their subordinates complained about Raccoons. They slumped their shoulders together.

“Is your Raccoon custom, sir?” Emma asked.

“I can’t really call it custom. It’s just got some optional parts. Only aces can generally request a *personalized* mobile knight.”

House Banfield’s policy was to reward personnel for good service. For skilled pilots, custom craft were one such perk.

“But having a craft that’s different from everyone else’s is cool, right? I really admire people with custom units.”

“You have a mobile knight model only you can pilot. I think that’s more impressive than a custom unit. Anyway, I should be going.” Claus rose from the bench and saluted Emma. “Back at the home planet, this fleet will split up. I don’t know when we might next cross paths, but I hope we both live to see it.”

Emma saluted him back. “Yes, sir.”

Emma had grown enough to understand the weight of Claus’s words about hoping they both survived long enough to reunite. They were knights with no idea when they would die. If either was killed, it wouldn’t be a surprise; they might very well *both* be. The chances that they’d meet again weren’t good, so it was possible this would be the last time they saw one another.

“I’ll pray for the Atalanta’s completion.”

“Then I’ll pray for your promotion, Head Knight.”

“Hmm?” Claus cocked his head.

“Captain Duffy told me she thought you would go far,” Emma informed him.

Hearing what his former subordinate had said, Claus looked bashful. At the same time, sadness showed on his face as he reflected on his fallen comrade.

“She thought too highly of me. I’m just doing what I can. I appreciate the sentiment, though.”

Thus, the two went their separate ways.

Chapter 12: Disbandment

THE ATALANTA'S DEV TEAM had gathered in a room aboard the upgraded Melea. The chamber was crammed with equipment, and various gauges and monitors displayed information on the Atalanta in real time.

Percy, the project lead, was talking to Emma through a monitor. "This will be the final test, Lieutenant Rodman. The results will determine whether this project succeeds."

"I understand."

It had been about two years since the Atalanta's repairs at the Seventh. Acting as a flagship, the Melea had supported the prototype's development with a fleet that was formerly part of the border region security force. A light carrier, a cruiser, and four destroyers: for a space force, that was a small fleet, but it was more than enough to support work on a single mobile knight.

Percy thought over everything that'd unfolded as they developed the Atalanta. She smiled nostalgically. "A lot's happened, but I'm thankful to you, too."

"Hee hee hee!" Emma chuckled bashfully.

The dev team felt themselves relax. The Atalanta was extraordinarily difficult to pilot; the only one who could do it was this girl whose features were still a bit childish. It was terribly incongruent. A knight with ample experience would normally have served as test pilot, but Emma just happened to be best at piloting the Atalanta.

"Once this test is over, the dev team will disband."

"I heard. You're going back to the Third Weapons Factory, right?"

"Yep. Who knows whether we'll develop a successor to the Atalanta. We'll

definitely work on something new, though.”

However this test ended, the dev team would be dissolved, which proved that the Atalanta’s development had reached an appropriate stopping point.

“I plan one day to design a craft that surpasses the Atalanta,” Percy told Emma. “I’ll send it straight to you when it’s done. So don’t die until then, okay?”

“This test’s not over yet, you know,” Emma said with a wry smile.

Percy trusted her, however. “I believe you’ll succeed. Okay—carry on with the test.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The Atalanta launched from the Melea’s hangar, its personal multipurpose rifle in one hand. The long rifle was an expensive piece of equipment in and of itself. It was equipped for automatic fire as well as sniping, and could switch between shooting live rounds and lasers.

In its normal operating mode, the Atalanta headed for a rocky area and fired at targets prepared there. It moved as it shot, but its accuracy was very high. Firing accurately on targets in an environment like this was a tall order for the pilot; with one wrong move, they could crash into a rock and take massive damage. Emma could handle it, however.

One of Percy’s colleagues looked at Emma’s data, excited. “The lieutenant really is a good shot. Her score’s amazing.”

She had issues with close combat—her skills were average for a knight—but her special aptitudes made up for her otherwise mediocre abilities. Her shooting had gotten even better recently, in fact.

“Of course it is,” Percy replied, and explained why. “Ever since we made those first improvements to the Atalanta, the lieutenant’s been doing serious training. After all that, she’d better have improved.” Though Percy’s words were harsh, she was smiling. She’d watched Emma train and was happy to see the young knight’s efforts pay off.

As the team looked at one another and grinned, the test moved on to its next stage.

“Deploying enemy Raccoons. Proceed to overload state, Lieutenant Rodman.”

“Roger!”

The Atalanta began to glow, its joints discharging yellow sparks. Even to the observers on the Melea, it was obvious that the craft was already speeding up as it kept weaving through the area’s numerous obstacles. The mobile knight left behind a line of yellow light as it moved.

“It really is incredible.” Percy crossed her arms. “But I can’t stand those craft she’s going up against.”

Doug, a pilot in the Third Platoon of the Melea’s First Company, was flying a Raccoon. His assault rifle was loaded with paint bullets, so if he landed a clean hit on the Atalanta, it wouldn’t cause problems. Still, he was in a cold sweat.

“The kid’s coming, Larry!”

He was nervous because he sensed that the Atalanta was a threat in its overloaded state. He’d fought against the prototype in a number of tests already, and it was a formidable foe.

“Aware of that, thanks!”

Larry’s Raccoon attacked the Atalanta. He tried to snipe the prototype with his rifle, but the obstacles around them—and the way the Atalanta weaved through them—gave him no chance to aim properly, so none of his shots hit. A paint bullet struck a rock and splattered it with blue.

“I told you to just spray instead of aiming!” Doug yelled.

That was what Doug was doing in his Raccoon. He’d covered the rocks around him in blue paint, but not a single one of his shots struck the Atalanta. He quickly ran out of bullets and had to swap magazines; Emma’s Atalanta took that opportunity to fly in close.

“Show some mercy, kid!” Doug grumbled.

Larry took the opportunity to retort, *“You leave yourself open, wasting bullets like that!”*

Emma aimed the Atalanta’s multipurpose rifle at the center of Doug’s Raccoon—the cockpit—and fired two paint bullets at him.

As red paint appeared on Doug’s Raccoon, his system alerted him, *“Direct shot to the cockpit.”*

“Damn it!” Doug cursed his own ineptitude as his craft became inoperable.

Drifting, he heard Larry yell, *“No fair!”* His squad mate seemed aggravated that Emma had gotten behind him and shot him. At that point, Larry’s craft became inoperable as well, though he could still complain from the cockpit. *“How are we supposed to beat the Atalanta in this mode?! Even if we have Raccoons, their specs fall leagues short!”*

Hearing Larry grouse that the test was pointless, Doug struck up a conversation; he had nothing better to do. “Don’t worry. The kid’s just about the only person who can pilot a craft like this. And if Raccoons aren’t good enough test opponents for her, then that’d go for any other craft.”

Their Raccoons were cutting-edge machines with extremely high specs. If they fell short as mock enemies, no mass-produced mobile knight would give the Atalanta a run for its money.

“I know that, but...”

“These things aren’t bad, though,” Doug added, enjoying the texture of his cockpit seat. “No, actually. They’re good craft. Nothing like Moheives.”

“Moheive” was practically synonymous with “mass-produced unit.” Raccoons differed from those down to the quality of their cockpits.

Larry seemed to agree. *“They’re not bad. I didn’t think even cutting-edge mobile knights were this impressive. They could’ve done something about the exterior, though, couldn’t they?”*

Although Raccoons were solid, knights and soldiers just didn't like how they looked. Doug had come around to his after piloting it for a while, though.

"You think? I've started to feel like they don't look that bad."

"What?! You're joking!"

As they talked, the test seemed to wrap up. They heard other allies complain over the comms.

"If you want mock enemies for a knight to face, get knights!"

"Seriously!"

"You think they'd send a crew like ours more knights?"

As his comrades griped bluntly, Doug reflected, *These guys might've perked up a bit, compared to before, but they still don't like training or anything.* Although their ships and mobile knights were state-of-the-art now, the pilots were still low-level. Doug knew that better than anyone else.

The kid should hurry up and get sent somewhere people are actually motivated. He wanted Emma transferred elsewhere rather than rotting along with them.

Doug looked at a picture he'd brought into his cockpit. It showed the lover and brother who'd both died in battle. He reached toward the photo. *When I see her, I can't help remembering you guys. I guess I still haven't gotten over what happened to you.*

A hearing was taking place in the Vulture Mercenary Alliance headquarters. The alliance leader was questioning Sirena, the head of one of their top groups.

"You've caused the alliance quite a problem, Sirena. I never thought you'd pick a fight with the Empire's Seventh Weapons Factory. We got complaints from the Empire, other weapons factories, even individual imperial nobles; it's been a headache."

Even with her boss lecturing her about the trouble she'd caused the coalition, Sirena was cool as ever. "I apologize."

"That's rich, coming from someone who disappeared for two years."

"Oh? I paid my dues, didn't I?"

Other higher-ups looked at Sirena with sour expressions.

"Haven't you lost most of your forces?" the leader pressed. "I don't think your little operation can count itself among our top chapters anymore. What do you think?"

Since House Banfield had destroyed a thousand of their ships, the Dahlia Mercenaries' numbers *were* significantly reduced. Still, the easy smile remained on Sirena's lips. "I've already replaced my lost troops. After the job at the Seventh, I made some money doing standard jobs. I've actually got *more* forces now."

She wasn't lying about having already replenished the Dahlia Mercenaries. It was true. After attacking the Seventh Weapons Factory, she'd joined some battles between squabbling nobles, which had replenished her forces.

The alliance leader smirked. "How long will it take to get any use out of the rabble you rounded up? Even if you scraped together the numbers in two years, I imagine you'll need more time to get them into fighting shape."

Sirena knew her hastily gathered troops *would* take time to fight well, but she couldn't show weakness, so all she could do was bluff. "We're working, aren't we? What more do you want from us?"

The other higher-ups continued to glare at her. They had their top positions in the alliance in common, but they didn't consider one another allies. They were rivals who at times fought each other. On top of that, many mercenary organizations held positions lower than theirs, and plenty schemed to topple one of the current higher-ups and take their place. This gathering consisted of those who had—for the time being—come out on top of a ruthless power

struggle.

“I’d say that’s all we’re getting out of you today,” the leader declared. “The alliance will deal with the Seventh’s complaints. Just understand that you won’t get any technology from them in future.”

“I’m well aware.” She’d taken that job understanding that she’d never be able to do business with the Seventh again.

The leader stopped questioning Sirena and moved on to other matters. As they discussed where fighting was intensifying and related subjects, Sirena forced herself to smile. However, her blood boiled.

I went through hell because of those damn Banfield knights. Chengsi’s one thing, but whoever commanded that fleet is a bigger problem. I don’t know whether it was a soldier or a knight. And then there’s...Emma Rodman.

She found it oddly difficult to forgive the girl with the naive dreams of knighthood.

I hope she’s ready for the next time we meet on the battlefield.

Epilogue

HYDRA WAS HOUSE BANFIELD'S home planet, and thanks to its count's policies, it was rich with nature. Seen from space, it was beautiful and verdant, so much so that visitors arriving at its spaceport often stopped to stare.

Count Banfield's mansion on Hydra was so vast, it could be called a city. It functioned as one, too. Among the many structures comprising the mansion was a building where knights worked. Particular care had been put into that structure's appearance.

In its communications room, Colonel Claudia Beltran was conversing with her superior Christiana, who was completing a mission on the Capital Planet.

In her white knight's uniform, back ramrod straight, Claudia was the picture of a soldier. Her skin was fair, and her eyes and hair were blue. Her strong-willed but otherwise emotionless demeanor led others to think of her as cold. Claudia had served as Emma's knight instructor once, but had left that position, and now held a role managing House Banfield's knights on Hydra. She reported directly to Christiana.

Christiana was one of the pillars of House Banfield's knights, but she was away on the Capital Planet serving their lord. When she wasn't on Hydra, she left her managerial work to subordinates and aides. Claudia, one such subordinate, was giving her a regular report.

"...That summarizes the state of the domain. Every so often, we're attacked by pirates who don't know anything, but the rest steer clear."

She'd finished updating Christiana, but on the other side of the call, Christiana didn't look pleased. She must've been thinking about something; she didn't appear to be concentrating on Claudia's report.

Claudia was curious about what was bothering her, since Christiana rarely acted like this. The report had been routine. Nothing in it would've upset

Christiana, and they weren't dealing with any major trouble at the moment. They weren't completely trouble *free*, but the only issues were within their expectations, so Claudia had no idea what could be vexing the other woman.

"Lady Christiana, is something bothering you?"

Christiana smiled self-deprecatingly, as if ashamed of worrying her subordinate. She must not have thought her emotions showed on her face.

Claudia surmised that there'd been trouble on the Capital Planet. *It's practically a den of evil there. Serving our lord in a place like that must be difficult.*

Christiana's face relaxed, and she apologized to Claudia, her tone normal. *"I'm sorry. I was listening to your report. I'll confirm the details later."*

Claudia had sent the reports she and Christiana's other subordinates had written to the Capital Planet for their boss to review. A household House Banfield's size generated an enormous amount of data merely for a routine report. Even for an enhanced knight, it was hard work going over it all. An average knight probably couldn't have read through the reports even if they took an entire day to do so. Yet Christiana had casually said that she'd check the details later, as if that would only take her a second; she would likely look over everything.

Even on the Capital Planet, Christiana kept herself updated about Hydra's goings-on. Although Claudia gave her regular reports, they could discuss things like Christiana had just been there until recently. In fact, Claudia only reported like this to provide intel missing from the written reports. Christiana always got the latest information to better serve her lord—that was the way she did things.

I'll never compare to her.

Claudia herself was an exceptionally talented knight, but despite that, she saw Christiana's abilities as on a different level. Yet life on the Capital Planet wasn't easy even for Christiana. Claudia worried about her superior, seeing signs that she was fatigued.

“You’re busy on the Capital Planet, aren’t you? I urge you to get some rest before you collapse.” Claudia only made the somewhat exaggerated suggestion because she considered Christiana a close friend.

“Do I look that tired?” Christiana asked, surprised.

Claudia laughed. “Yes.”

Christiana sighed. It was clear she was embarrassed to show a subordinate so much weakness. She obviously found letting an underling worry about her unacceptable. *“If I’m making my subordinates anxious about me, I really am hopeless.”*

“Please get some rest. It would be trouble for us too if you collapsed.”

That wasn’t just flattery. No one within House Banfield could serve as Christiana’s replacement. There might’ve been one person who matched her in ability, but Claudia would never choose to rely on them.

Christiana seemed to have no intention of taking a breather. *“I’m afraid I won’t be resting anytime soon... At any rate, I hear the Atalanta’s development was a success.”*

Both women were somewhat interested in the experimental prototype she’d brought up. Normally, the successful development of a previously defective mobile knight wasn’t something they would discuss, but both happened to be slightly connected to the project.

For Claudia, this was an achievement a former student—Lieutenant Emma Rodman—had worked toward. Despite having been Emma’s instructor, Claudia didn’t let her emotions show on her face. However, she was happy and proud that her student had succeeded in such an important role.

“She accomplished a difficult mission. However, we promoted her in advance for it,” she noted. “All we can reward her with is a bonus and a long vacation.”

The Atalanta’s successful development was a big achievement that more than justified a promotion. Before the project began, however, Emma had already

been promoted from sub-lieutenant to lieutenant and from knight rank D to B.

Two years had passed since then, but Claudia had no intention of promoting her again, less out of malice than concern. A sudden promotion would burden Emma; promotions came with added responsibility, after all. There were ambitious knights who desired to rise through the ranks quickly, but Claudia didn't peg Emma as that type. She judged that it would be best not to burden the girl unnecessarily. Instead, she hoped to restore her spirit with a monetary reward and time off.

Christiana had likely caught on to what Claudia was thinking. She smiled, seeming to agree. *"Yes, she should command a platoon as a lieutenant for a bit longer. No need to rush her promotion."*

Sometimes a promotion wasn't what was best for someone. If the recipient were skilled, promotion generally wasn't an issue; however, despite being a superior pilot, Emma was an unpolished knight in other regards. Since she apparently lacked a strong desire to be promoted, they'd put it off for now.

But Christiana couldn't accept Claudia's suggestion entirely. *"We can't let her take time off, though."*

The complicated expression on her superior's face puzzled Claudia, who thought Emma and her team deserved a break. "They just finished a mission that took two years," she argued. "They need *some* kind of downtime. Is there any reason to push them so hard?"

Sighing, Christiana explained why they couldn't take time off. *"Our lord is butting heads with Second Prince Linus. Going forward, the military will be busy for a while."*

Such a conflict constituted political trouble between the Empire's second prince and one of its counts, and the news shocked Claudia. House Banfield had never gotten involved in politics on the Capital Planet before. She couldn't believe it was happening now, but she also didn't think Christiana would lie about that.

She realized quickly why their lord was feuding. *If he's at odds with the second prince, it must be about...the Empire's heir!* "We're getting involved in the succession conflict?"

"That's right." Christiana admitted it so readily, her side must already have been preparing for the situation.

Claudia finally understood her exhaustion. "So that's why you're so tired, Lady Christiana. I suppose our forces really can't take breaks if we'll be in conflict with the second prince."

Up against the prince, Claudia understood, they *couldn't* give Emma that vacation. Many nobles supported Linus; even Claudia had heard about the size of his faction on the Capital Planet. She could effortlessly picture how busy House Banfield's knights would be in a conflict with him. A knight's place wasn't just on the battlefield, after all. Many used their superhuman abilities for more bureaucratic duties.

Christiana informed Claudia of Emma's new mission. *"The former Atalanta development team will return to the Seventh Weapons Factory for maintenance. There, they'll meet a fleet that will join their next mission."*

Claudia thought it was strange that the mission fleet was assembling at the Seventh Weapons Factory. What was the reason? "At the Seventh? Not on Hydra?"

"I suppose it'll be the lieutenant's first time there in two years, won't it?" Christiana continued.

The Atalanta and its mothership, the Melea, had been repaired at the Seventh two years earlier. This would be a sort of homecoming for Emma and her team.

"Yes. They were attacked by mercenaries there."

Everyone had heard about that attack on the Seventh. A fleet of House Banfield's just happened to be there at the time; they'd intervened and minimized the damage. When she heard that story, Claudia had been proud of

her allies.

Christiana, who'd read the report on the incident, smiled. *"Lieutenant Rodman played a role in that battle as well, didn't she? You must be proud of her, as her former instructor."*

Claudia blushed slightly at Christiana's teasing, but that was her only reaction. *"I was insufficient as an instructor. My student's achievements are hers alone."*

Christiana gave her an exasperated look. *"Rigid as always, aren't you? Anyway, that's enough joking around."* She gazed seriously at Claudia through the monitor. *"The Atalanta's mothership, the Melea, is going to start its real mission."*

"Real mission? Beyond the one it's carrying out now...?"

The Melea had originally been a light carrier charged with the security of the territory's border regions, but Christiana didn't sound like she was referring to that.

She smiled. *"Why do you think we modified the Melea into an experimental engineering ship? It's going to keep testing new models for us."*

"Its 'real mission' is as an experimental engineering vessel? I see." They hadn't overhauled the old ship just for the Atalanta. They planned to continue using it for testing—hence all its new facilities. However, the ship was run by shiftless soldiers from the old army. *"Well, the lieutenant's one thing, but do you really think such a mission suits the Melea's other crew?"*

That didn't seem to bother Christiana. *"They'll just have to do their best, won't they?"*

"I don't feel like there's any particular need to use them for this..."

"Well, I'm against it. But she insists they participate."

"She'?" Claudia cocked her head.

Christiana gave her a resigned look. Evidently, this had already been decided, and the decision couldn't be overturned. *"This mission's fleet will be*

commanded by Marie Marian."

"Wha—?!" Claudia was so shocked by the name that she reacted impulsively. Her next response was worry for Emma. "She'll break Lieutenant Rodman. I request that order be rescinded. I think there's still time if you object, Lady Christiana."

Christiana just shook her head. *"I would have stopped it already if I could've. I don't know where she got the lieutenant's name, but she requested Emma Rodman specifically. She already received his permission."*

When Claudia heard that *he* had already approved the order, all she could do was back down. "I suppose there's nothing we can do, then."

"Nope. Only pray Lieutenant Rodman makes it back to Hydra in one piece."

The former Atalanta dev team arrived at the Seventh Weapons Factory for the first time in two years. When the Melea was safely docked, Mag and the other engineers deployed with them disembarked.



Emma and Molly said goodbye to the engineers who'd spent the last two years working with them.

Molly clung to Mag, crying. "Take care of yourself, Maggy!"

"Molly, I can't believe you're still calling me that. How many times have I told you I'm older than you...?" Though Mag was clearly exasperated, he also looked pleased. There were tears in *his* eyes too as he parted with Molly.

Watching them, Emma smiled wryly. "You two really hit it off, huh? Um, I'm going to go say hi to some people from the Seventh. I've also got some meetings, and I have to pick up optional parts and stuff too."

"Why don't we go together, then?" Mag offered. "I've got to make my report."

"Sure."

"Feels good, returning home for the first time in two years. It's nostalgic for you too, isn't it?"

Emma thought back to everything that'd happened at the Seventh. What stood out most in her mind was Captain Duffy saving her life...and Sirena deceiving and attacking them.

"Yeah... This place really made an impression on me."

Emma and Mag left the dock together.

After an inspection, Emma and Mag entered the building at the center of Asteroid Neia and the Seventh Weapons Factory. They headed for the room where their meeting would take place. In contrast to the docking area earlier, this building held only office workers in suits.

Mag didn't seem to like it much. "Haven't been here in a while... I'm not comfortable anywhere that doesn't smell like oil and machinery." He evidently wanted to get this over with quickly.

Walking beside the discomfited Mag, Emma agreed entirely. “I don’t really like formal places like this either.”

Mag just smiled as though he understood. The pair had been on the same team aboard the Melea for the last two years. By now, they understood each other pretty well.

“People tend to lose any shame they might’ve had before working for the military. Molly’s one thing, but you’ve gotten pretty relaxed yourself, Emma.”

“Huh?! I-I have?! I don’t think I’ve ever been as relaxed as Molly...” Even as she protested, Emma’s face flushed. She must’ve had some idea of what he was talking about.

Sighing, Mag gave Emma a warning, concerned for her future. “Humans are always influenced by their environment. Dwarves are the same, of course. But personally, I think you should leave the Melea, Emma.”

Emma stopped. “What...?” Not expecting those words, she was dumbfounded for a moment.

Mag stopped as well and explained himself. “Having served with the dev team, I’m sorry to say it, but I couldn’t call them a quality crew even as flattery. In your platoon alone, no one but Molly has any motivation. She’s an exception, I suppose. Molly’s the type who’ll always be happy as long as she gets to play around with machines.” He massaged the bridge of his nose for a moment. “Anyway, I don’t think the Melea’s the right place for you. I don’t want to see them corrupt you, Emma.”

Seeing the Melea’s unmotivated crew up close, Mag had worried that they would influence Emma negatively. He wasn’t so much trash-talking the crew as criticizing them out of concern for Emma.

He began walking again. A moment later, Emma followed. “I want to *reform* the people aboard the Melea.”

When she told Mag that, he stopped urging her to leave the ship. “You do,

eh? Well, it's your life. You should do what you want with it."

Walking beside Mag, Emma pictured the Melea's crew. They were soldiers who'd once risked their lives to protect Hydra. Their spirits were broken now, but she couldn't bring herself to just abandon them.

How can they regain their motivation?

Their mothership had been renovated, and they'd received state-of-the-art mobile knights, but that hadn't really changed them. The crew still refused to train, and they were always lazy on missions. They weren't improving as Emma desired.

While she was lost in thought, the pair came to a four-way intersection in the hall. From there, they heard shouting.

"Are you listening to me, Nias?!"

When she heard the familiar name, Emma stopped mulling over the crew, turning in the direction of the voice. It was coming from the right. She exchanged a glance with Mag, and both nodded. They poked their heads around the corner to get a look at what was happening.

A man in a suit was closing in on Nias, who was pressed against the wall. He must've been her superior. At a glance, it almost seemed like he was making an advance on her. The expression on his face, however, made it immediately clear that that wasn't happening. The man was red with rage. Nias, pressed against the wall, averted her eyes as if his yelling had nothing to do with her.

"How much trouble do you have to cause before you're satisfied?!"

There must've been some serious issue, but Nias didn't have a shred of guilt on her face. She took a candy from her pocket and put it in her mouth before answering. "I just helped *solve* a problem for you. If you went ahead with that plan, you'd eventually have hit a snag anyway. You should be *thanking* me, if you ask me."

"*Thanking* you?! Where do you get off saying something like that?!"

The emotionless Nias—bags under her eyes, hair messy—apparently didn't intend to adjust her behavior for her superior.

Watching them, Mag told Emma, “Hey, that guy's pretty high up. Geez. Nias really isn't scared of anything.”

“Is Nias really amazing enough to take that attitude with a higher-up...?”

“Well, I guess she's pretty amazing...but she's also what you'd probably call aloof. She doesn't care what anyone around her thinks. And that's how she acts with people she has no interest in.”

“You're not getting away with it this time,” fumed the superior Nias evidently didn't care about. “I'll take you off development for now! You want to go back to sales?” He was older than Nias, and clearly held authority; he was likely one of the Seventh Weapons Factory's administrators.

Nias didn't change her attitude one bit, though. She looked away and sighed. Even his threat to remove her from development didn't affect her. She had an expression like this whole conversation was a waste of time.

Mag watched her, an indecipherable look on his face. “Well, Nias hasn't changed.”

She'd always had an arrogance that matched her “Mad Genias” nickname. Emma's impression was that she was a solitary genius who cowed everyone around her into submission. “Nias is a bit prickly, isn't she? I get the feeling that she doesn't open up to many people.”

Mag was surprised for a moment, then burst out laughing. “She is prickly. And I haven't seen her open up myself. Even Nias can't say ‘no’ to everyone, though. I hear she becomes a totally different person in front of a certain someone.”

Emma couldn't imagine the sulky Nias in front of her acting totally different. “Really?”

“I think it was a few years after she started here that the higher-ups made her do sales for a bit, trying to instill some communication skills. She was a little

more friendly back then, but she still didn't get along with people too well." Mag spoke solemnly, folding his arms.

That was hard for Emma to wrap her head around, though. "I can't even imagine Nias in sales. I mean, it's pretty unbelievable, seeing her sulk in front of her superior like that."

"Well, the more talented someone is, the more personality problems they'll inevitably have."

As they spoke, Nias's terminal rang. It must've been a call from someone important, because she jumped. Emma thought Nias's boss would just be angrier that her terminal had interrupted his lecture, but he had a different reaction: his eyes widened too, and he seemed to be sweating. He must also have known who was calling.

Wrapping up his lecture, he pointed at Nias. "That'll be all for today... You've got a call from a customer. Don't be rude, now! Got it?!"

With those emphatic words, he practically ran away.

Emma cocked her head. What surprised her most was how Nias was reacting. Her earlier sullenness had vanished, and she came off as flustered.

Mag, on the other hand, smirked. He must've known something.

Nias glanced around for a room to take the call in. She obviously didn't want anyone to overhear. As her eyes darted, her fingers combed through her hair hastily.

Emma's eyes bugged. *She's worrying about how she looks?!*

Nias couldn't have cared less how she looked in front of her boss, but now she was trying to tidy her appearance. This "customer" must've been that important. But the caller presumably wasn't any personal connection of Nias's, like a significant other, which just made Emma more confused.

So, even Nias has someone she tries to look nice for... Hmm?

With a start, Emma noticed something else. Just as Nias spotted a room and

went inside, Emma glimpsed her blushing, and had to cover her mouth to keep from yelping in surprise.

Once Nias had gone into the room, and was no longer in sight, Emma remarked, "So even Nias can make a face like that."

Mag gave a hearty laugh, evidently quite amused by her reaction. "Yeah, we've seen that a few times. You might be surprised to find out who she's talking to, though."

Emma was certainly getting curious. Mag seemed to know, so she decided to ask. "Who is it?"

Mag thought for a moment before scratching his head. "Hmm... Well, it *is* someone you know."

"Someone I know? Huh? I wonder who..." Emma cocked her head.

Mag got a mischievous look on his face, as though he'd just thought of something. "You know, I think it'll be more fun to keep quiet about this one."

That just made Emma more curious. "What?! Tell me! I want to know who can get Nias to act like that!"

"Nope." Mag started walking again, leaving Emma behind with her curiosity. "Can't give away info on important customers. Confidentiality and all that jazz. I'm sure you'll find out sooner or later."

A group of ships from the Capital Planet had just reached the Seventh Weapons Factory docks. Once the jumbo-size transport and its assorted vessels had docked properly, the crew could take a brief rest.

Among them was a young knight who made his way into the weapons factory, his subordinates in tow. He stopped in the port, looking up at a specific ship he spotted on the other side of the cylindrical dock, near the ceiling. It was the light carrier Melea.

"Is something the matter, Commander Bonner?" one subordinate asked,

curious as to why he'd stopped.

The young man's name was Russell Bonner. He'd graduated from the knight academy with Emma, and unlike her, he'd been on the elite course. Immediately after graduating, he was stationed on the Capital Planet as part of their lord's guard. Now he was here with the mobile knight platoon he commanded to serve in a certain mission.

"No, it's nothing," Russell responded.

He started walking again, his two subordinates following. Both were excellent knights.

"Come to think of it, I heard a rumor that a group developing a new mobile knight will participate in this mission too," one said.

"I heard that new mobile knight is a Nemain for ace pilots," the other added. "Think they'll give that model to us?"

They acted easygoing, but they were fast-tracked elites as well as Russell. Their platoon, made up exclusively of knights, could be called one of House Banfield's *most* elite. They would all be piloting cutting-edge custom machines; for this mission, new custom Nemains had been readied for each of them.

A little exasperated with his subordinates' carefree attitude, Russell gave them a somber answer. "The Third Weapons Factory developed the Nemain model. We won't get Nemains from the Seventh."

The other two's shoulders slumped.

"That's too bad..." one said.

"I mean, we did *just* get new craft," his companion replied.

"But they're just custom craft, right?" the first subordinate protested. "I want a *personal* craft. Think we'll get those as rewards if we do well on this mission?"

The pair were arrogant, but they'd graduated House Banfield's knight academy with grades warranting that arrogance. They were lieutenants, and Russell, who commanded them, was already a captain. They were still C-rank

knights, however. Their knight rank wouldn't rise until they had more experience. Russell knew one fellow graduate who'd already reached B rank, though: Emma Rodman. The classmate he'd told to give up on knighthood had already surpassed him.

I'll show her who's the better knight. I can't stay lower ranked than that failure.

Russell's pride as an elite knight made him fixate on Emma. Although his military rank was superior to hers, her knight rank had surpassed his; he couldn't let that be. His pride and personal stubbornness wouldn't permit him to.

This mission will settle things between us. Just wait, Emma Rodman!

BONUS STORY:

A Private Room

“**Y**OU HAVE A PRIVATE ROOM, Emma?!” Molly exclaimed loudly in the Melea’s messroom.

She drew the eyes of the other soldiers eating in the mess. Once they realized the shouts came from Molly, though, they lost interest.

Across from Molly, Emma had a complicated expression. She was embarrassed that her friend was yelling about her in public, of course, but she also simply didn’t understand her surprise. “Molly, you *do* know I’m a knight, right?”

“Still, that earned you a private room? Isn’t that kind of thing for lieutenants and up?!”

There wasn’t enough room on a ship for each crew member to receive a private room. Besides a select few exceptions, all crew shared their quarters.

Molly, who’d been eating with Emma, didn’t seem happy with the arrangement. “Weren’t you just promoted recently? Isn’t it a little unfair that you got one from the *start*?”

Needless to say, as a private first class, Molly didn’t have her own room aboard the Melea. All she got was a capsule in a large suite several soldiers shared. It had room to lie down in, but was only tall enough to crouch inside. There were several capsules in the suite; Doug and Larry had their own. Private rooms were indeed reserved for higher-ranking officers, hence Molly’s assertion that Emma’s accommodations weren’t fair.

Emma sighed. “It isn’t unfair. I’m a knight. It’s in the regulations.”

In that case, there was nothing Molly could do. “I want a private room too!”

Emma smiled at her envy. “It’s not really anything to be jealous of.”

“Why? Isn’t it nice having your own room?”

“Want to come see it? You’ll understand.”

Molly agreed enthusiastically. “Can I?! Yay! I got invited to Emma’s room!”

Seeing her excitement, Emma felt a little bad.

“What is this...?”

After their meal, Molly and Emma had headed straight for Emma’s private room, but Molly found her expectations betrayed. The bedframe in the dim room was rusty. The other furniture was in rough shape too. It definitely wasn’t what she’d pictured when she thought of a commanding officer’s room. Its one saving grace was that it was fairly spacious.

“They never had an opportunity to assign the room reserved for knights, so it was left empty for a long time,” Emma explained. “I tried to clean it up a little, but there’s a limit to what one person can do...”

“Can you complain to Colonel Baker and get a new room?”

“He said there weren’t any other rooms for knights, so I have to make do with this one.” Emma laughed.

“Sorry for all that before.” Molly felt ashamed for envying Emma. “If you want, I’ll help you clean and fix this stuff up.”

“Thanks, Molly!”

Afterword

THE SECOND VOLUME OF *I'm the Heroic Knight of an Intergalactic Empire!*, a spinoff of *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!*, has successfully been released!

It really is nice to publish the second book. It's been ten years since I debuted as an author, but I'm always excited when I get to release a new volume of a series.

Incidentally, Volume Two of *I'm the Heroic Knight...!* is the first book I'll publish after the ten-year anniversary of my debut. I never thought a spinoff would be the work that completed the first decade of my writing career (lol).

I was on year eleven as an author before I knew it, and I'll keep working hard to make it to year twelve next. Your continued support is appreciated!

Now, it'll be boring if I only write about myself, so let me take this opportunity to discuss some characters from the main series who appeared in this spinoff.

Was the biggest surprise Nias Carlin, I wonder? Claus and Chengsi showed up as well, of course, but I don't think they came off as differently as Nias did.

In this book, I wrote a side of Nias that I don't think we'll ever see in the main series. She could never show that series's protagonist, Liam, those characteristics (lol). When I posted those sections to the web version, readers wondered if it was a different person with the same name (lol).

Don't worry, it's the same Nias. There won't be a twist like "This is actually a parallel world!" or anything. This volume just depicts another facet of her.

Before posting the web version of *I'm the Heroic Knight...!*, I came up with a list of things I wanted to do in a spinoff. One was to include a character from the main series. And not just in a cameo, but in a main role. At the same time, I figured it'd be fun if I could show off a side of them you didn't get to see in the

main story. That's how I got started with this series. I began it really casually, since I never thought it'd be published.

How does the world look from the perspective of this series's heroine, Emma? And how do the characters from the main series come off to her? If you enjoy the parts of the spinoff that don't turn up in the main story, I'll be happy.

Well, thanks again for your support!

*Panicking when the most
important customer calls*



Thanks for your continuing support.



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