



I'M THE **HEROIC KNIGHT** OF AN
**INTERGALACTIC
EMPIRE**

➤ **WRITTEN BY**
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NOVEL

1

Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: A Defective D-Ranker](#)

[Chapter 2: The Border Region Security Force](#)

[Chapter 3: The Masterpiece Moheive](#)

[Chapter 4: The Third Platoon](#)

[Chapter 5: The Space Pirates](#)

[Chapter 6: An Emergency Deployment](#)

[Chapter 7: The Jager Squad](#)

[Chapter 8: Banfield Demons](#)

[Chapter 9: Sacrificial Pawns](#)

[Chapter 10: The Atalanta](#)

[Chapter 11: A Prodigy](#)

[Chapter 12: The Man She Most Admired](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[BONUS STORY: The Award Ceremony](#)

[BONUS STORY: Claudia Beltran's Facade](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)



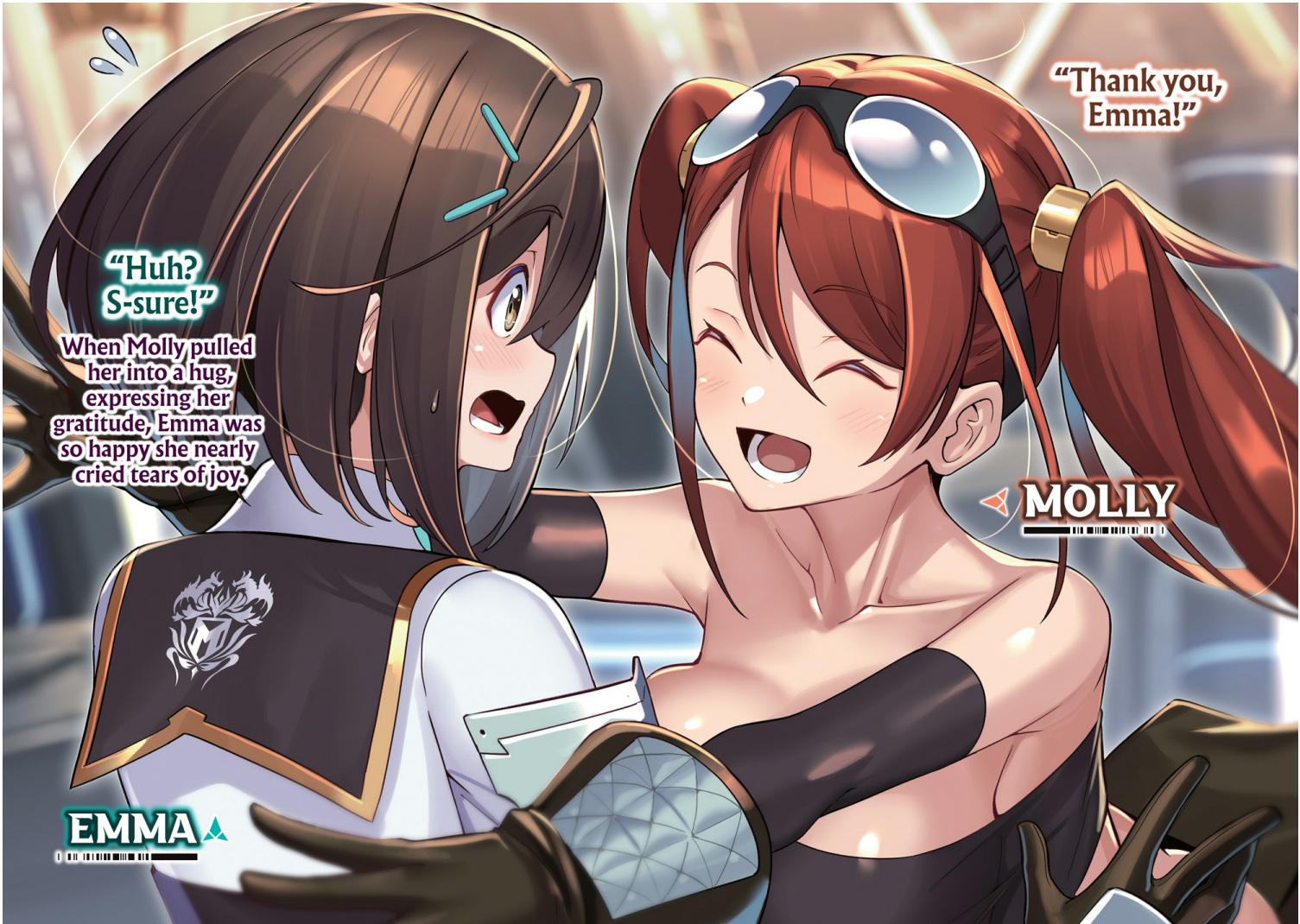


"You need to be gentler with fledglings right out of the knight academy. Throwing them into combat first thing... That's too much to ask."

"Knights who haven't seen real combat are worthless."

CHRISTIANA ▲

▲ **CLAUDIA**



“Huh?
S-sure!”

“Thank you,
Emma!”

When Molly pulled
her into a hug,
expressing her
gratitude, Emma was
so happy she nearly
cried tears of joy.

MOLLY

EMMA

“Still, if I
have you...
I can do this!”



CONTENTS

▶	Prologue	
▶	1 A Defective D-Ranker	
▶	2 The Border Region Security Force	
▶	3 The Masterpiece Moheive	
▶	4 The Third Platoon	
▶	5 The Space Pirates	
▶	6 An Emergency Deployment	
▶	7 The Jager Squad	
▶	8 Banfield Demons	
▶	9 Sacrificial Pawns	
▶	10 The Atalanta	
▶	11 A Prodigy	
▶	12 The Man She Most Admired	
▶	Epilogue	
▶	BONUS The Award Ceremony	
▶	BONUS Claudia Beltran's Facade	
▶	Afterword	

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

AN ASTEROID several dozen kilometers in length drifted in space. The pits dotting its surface were evidence that the asteroid had previously been used as a place to mine resources.

Tunnels within the asteroid ranged in length from a few meters to hundreds. Now that it was no longer being mined, the asteroid had been fortified, its hollow interior outfitted as a military base. In one section of that base, new recruits in crisp uniforms stood at attention, their magnetized shoes allowing them to stand not only on the floor but on the zero-gravity space's walls and ceiling as well.

A three-dimensional image was being projected in the center of the room. To intimidate the cadets, the projected individual was several times larger than his real-life counterpart. He spoke in a passionate tone to the assembled recruits, gesturing dramatically to make his point.

That projected figure was a knight representing House Banfield. Knights were no mere soldiers—they trained from a young age, undergoing physical enhancement several times in the process. Dozens of average soldiers could train on the money and time invested into one of the superhuman combatants known as “knights” in an intergalactic nation like this.

“You have my deepest respect for enduring all the harsh training up to this day. From now on, you will be knights of House Banfield.”

House Banfield was a major noble house led by a count. It had domain over several planets suitable for human habitation in the Intergalactic Algrand Empire, which was ruled by the Albareto dynasty. House Banfield was passionate about training knights within its territory. The domain now contained several military schools for that purpose; the fortress inside the asteroid was one. That was simply due to the house's unique circumstances. Normally, they wouldn't have had to go to such efforts to encourage new talent

to serve them.

Despite the size of House Banfield's domain, they had none of the families of "vassals"—successive generations of serving knights—that were expected. Although this universe had intergalactic empires, it was also steeped in old-fashioned thinking that led to such generational systems. However, House Banfield didn't enjoy that generational manpower, which had forced them to hastily procure new knights they could call their own.

Over a thousand young people were lined up in this room, and all would serve as House Banfield's knights as of today.

One key factor limited who could be chosen for the position—age. It was very difficult for full-grown adults to obtain the superhuman power knights wielded. Although that wasn't impossible, it wasn't worth the cost, effort, and time. An investment in training adults would only produce "knights" barely worth the title, at best. Thus, only young people—children, really—were worth training into knights.

The people in this room were therefore all young enough to be in school. Of course, this being a universe with intergalactic empires, people didn't necessarily look their age. Apparent high schoolers were really over fifty, which was considered young.

Among these youths was a girl named Emma Rodman. Her appearance was still somewhat childish. She had big eyes, dark bobbed hair, and a friendly look. She was of average height for her age, and though her chest was modest, her lower half was rather plump. In fact, she was a little self-conscious about the flesh on her butt and thighs. Though she looked a little less mature than the average individual in the room, Emma would serve in House Banfield's military as a knight with all the rest starting today.

Her eyes glimmered with excitement as the graduation ceremony proceeded around her. *I'll finally be a knight after today!* Emma had dreamed of becoming one since she was little. *At last, I'm taking my first step. A step closer to him...*

One reason Emma wanted so badly to become a knight was a person she looked up to—Liam Sera Banfield, Count Banfield himself. Her admiration dated back to an occasion over thirty years ago that she remembered as if it were yesterday.

Over thirty years ago, a young Emma had been out with her parents. There was a huge crowd around them, everyone looking at the sky and cheering. In the distance, a fleet of enormous spacecraft stretched across the vast sky. The fleet proceeded in a line above House Banfield's home planet, Hydra, in a grand display for the citizens living there.

Around the ships were humanoid robots about eighteen meters tall. These were mobile knights—tools of war.

Such a display of military strength was intimidating, yet Emma's parents, family, and all the citizens around them cheered at the sight. They waved at the sky, some even crying. Many couples and families shared loving embraces, indulging in the bliss of the moment. After all, House Banfield's military had returned triumphantly from the battlefield.

"Count Banfield defeated Goaz's space pirate gang!"

"We're saved!"

"Long live House Banfield!"

The people sang the praises of House Banfield's military after its victory over the vicious space pirates. They'd received word of the gang's approach not long ago and had quaked in fear. Particularly vicious space pirates could easily defeat the military of a border planet like this, leaving the planet as wreckage in their wake. Everyone here had nearly drowned in despair imagining that dark future.

The one who'd pulled them from that pit of hopelessness was their new young lord. His name was Liam Sera Banfield. Although he wasn't even fully grown yet, the child nevertheless performed admirably as lord and drove off

the pirate threat.

A striking three-dimensional image of House Banfield's military was projected across the sky. A certain mobile knight was pictured among the battleships; the huge black machine had a distinctive look, large shields adorning its shoulders.

Emma reached both hands toward it, entranced by the unique figure of the mobile knight standing on the bow of one ship. "Mom, what's that?"

Her mother smiled and explained, "That's the count's mobile knight. I'm sure it's incredibly strong."

"The count is strong?"

Her mother seemed unsure how to answer this question. After all, she had no way to know how strong Lord Liam was. The government of Hydra made a great show of his strength, but his subjects had no idea how much of that was true. Most assumed some exaggeration occurred.

Still, Emma's mother must've wanted her child to dream big. "That's right. After all, he's a knight."

"A knight...?"

"Let me think... Knights are what you call really strong people. That knight protected us from the pirates."

Emma looked at the sky with her mother, watching the mobile knights fly in an orderly line. At that moment, an especially huge battleship soared right over them, blocking out the sunlight. Emma widened her eyes at the overwhelming might of the giant ship she was seeing in real life for the first time. She felt her heart pound.

"Knights protect us?"

"Right."

"Then...I'll be a knight! I'll ride in a robot and protect everyone from bad guys!"

When she heard her daughter's dream for the future, Emma's mother smiled. "You'll have to work hard, then."

"Yeah!"

Emma had vowed that day to become a knight.

After the graduation ceremony, Emma and the other students prepped for their shuttle ride in their rooms. Each two-person room held a bunk bed and two desks. There was also a closet, but it was too small to fit many things in, so packing didn't take much time.

After Emma finished packing, the knight who'd been her roommate until today started chatting with her. Her name was Rachel, and she had short, straight black hair; her long bangs covered one eye. The beautiful knight was like a model, tall and slender. Her formal uniform suited her splendidly. Emma wore the same uniform, but it looked completely different on her. They weren't far apart in age, yet Emma thought of her roommate as a reliable older sister.

The ornamentation on the two women's formal uniforms identified them as knights with the rank insignias of sub-lieutenants. Now that they'd graduated from the knight academy, Emma and Rachel would both indeed be sub-lieutenants in House Banfield's military.

"I suppose we'll be saying goodbye now."

Rachel was blunt, but that didn't bother Emma. "I hope we'll see each other again somewhere."

Rachel shrugged. She knew how unlikely that was in this universe. "Meeting again in this huge world would have to be fate... But that wouldn't be too bad, I suppose. Hope we both live to reunite one day." She glanced away in embarrassment.

Emma grinned at that. "I see you haven't gotten over your shy streak."

"Oh, shut up, klutz. I'm less worried about my 'shy streak' than how *you'll* do

in practical training.”

A practical training period known as the Selection awaited the knight academy’s graduates. It had been in effect in House Banfield’s domain for the last few years. In addition to a military rank, knights also received a “knight rank” corresponding to their skills, with “C” being average. Strength alone didn’t determine knight rank after the Selection; what was important was whether a knight would be useful to House Banfield going forward.

Emma looked away awkwardly. “I-I’ll do my best.”

“You’re fine with everything else, but you really struggle when it comes to piloting mobile knights.”

“That’s what I like most, though...”

Emma had admired mobile knights ever since that day when she was little. Yet for some reason, she’d always lacked skill piloting them, which held her back. She’d only managed to graduate by compensating for that weakness in other areas.

Seeing Emma clutch her head miserably, Rachel sighed. “We’ll both do our best.”

“Yeah...”

The pair left their room for the shuttle terminal with just slightly anxious hearts. As they strolled through the halls, they excitedly discussed what would come next.

“Where are you going, Rachel?”

“Squad Twenty-Four. What about you?”

“Squad One...”

“Huh? Seriously?”

There were many squadrons for new knights’ practical training, but the First was famous for its particularly strict instructor.

Rachel covered her face with her hand, tilting her head back. “I don’t envy your luck, Emma.”

“Enemy mobile knights spotted. Engaging allied mobile knight squadron.”

“One allied unit deviating from formation.”

“Sub-Lieutenant Rodman, please respond. Is it a malfunction? Sub-Lieutenant Rodman?”

Emma could hear the operators coordinating the battle. “N-no, everything’s fine!”

“Please rejoin the formation.”

“Yes!”

In her cockpit, Emma looked through her monitor out at space. She’d fulfilled her childhood dream to become a knight, but a cruel reality had awaited her after graduating the knight academy. She’d now been given a mobile knight and thrown into a real battle. Dressed in her pilot suit in the mobile knight’s cockpit, Emma was panicking in her first actual fight. She jerked the control sticks, pushing down the foot pedals. She was too flustered and tense to control the machine normally.

“Why?! Why is this—?!”

She was piloting one of House Banfield’s standard mass-produced Nemain units. It was a slender model in knightly armor; a booster unit on its back resembled a cape. When the booster extended, it looked like a pair of wings. Emma’s unit was painted gray.

The Nemain was an exceptional unit that even the regular army of the Algrand Empire—the intergalactic nation House Banfield belonged to—was considering adopting. In fact, it was the top candidate for the next standard-issue mobile knight across the entire Empire. Its performance was consistent, yet...

“Why won’t it move how I want it to?!” The machine’s refusal to respond to her control confounded Emma. “It’s more sluggish than in training! Did something go wrong in maintenance?!”

Cold sweat rolled down her forehead under her pilot suit’s helmet. There hadn’t been anything wrong during the systems check she ran before deploying, but the machine seemed to be reacting slowly for some reason.

“Why now?! This is my first battle...!”

She’d only just become a knight and sub-lieutenant, so she had no prior experience piloting a mobile knight in a real fight.

She somehow managed to rejoin her allies’ formation. The battlefield was full of asteroids, ranging in size from twenty meters across, slightly larger than a mobile knight, to over a hundred meters. The largest, which was several kilometers long, was the hideout of a small gang of space pirates. They’d hollowed several holes in the asteroid to hide their ships, outfitting the caverns with maintenance docks.

It was a good hiding spot, but not good enough to evade House Banfield’s eyes. Even a small gang of pirates were still pirates, so the house had dispatched forces against them. This was nothing more than a skirmish for House Banfield, but Emma saw it as her first battle; it couldn’t have been more important to her.

Her heart raced with anxiety. She’d never been so nervous in training, which only made things harder.

“Calm down, me! Just do it like you did when you trained! I can do this! I can, totally!”

She gripped the control sticks, doing her best to pilot the machine, but she was clearly overcompensating for the mobile knight’s poor performance.

The Nemain piloted by Emma’s instructor—who had been observing her movements— pulled up beside her. Instructor Claudia Beltran’s mobile knight

had a horn that wasn't present on the mass-produced units. It stretched upward from the back of the Nemain's head, identifying the craft as a commander's. The unit was also painted Claudia's personal colors, white and light blue. The fact that she had a personalized craft proved that Claudia's abilities as a knight had been recognized extensively.

"Sub-Lieutenant Rodman," Claudia called. "Your craft's movements are erratic. Stabilize it immediately."

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Emma continued to try to right her Nemain, but its assistance functions weren't helping much. Her panicked jerks of the control sticks only made the craft's movements wilder.

Under Claudia's scrutiny, she somehow avoided the asteroids and approached the pirates' base. By the time she arrived, her allies had already started fighting. The enemies—the space pirates—had deployed outdated mobile knights from their base. They were several generations behind current models, and most were patched up to such a degree that hardly any trace of the original unit remained. Yet in the face of House Banfield's state-of-the-art units, the pirates refused to give up, recklessly challenging the army. It would've been more logical to surrender, but the pirates didn't have that option.

After all, House Banfield—to which Emma belonged—showed absolutely no mercy to space pirates. The pirates were all too aware of that fact, and House Banfield's well-known and ruthless methods for dealing with such pirates were why this gang was fighting them so fiercely.

One of Emma's allied Nemains approached an enemy craft and thrust a physical blade into its cockpit. Emma paled at the sight. Of course, she'd finished off plenty of enemies in training, but that was in a simulator. She hesitated at the prospect of fighting a real enemy now.

As if her instructor could figure out Emma's emotions from her piloting, she berated the new knight. *"What are you doing, Sub-Lieutenant Rodman? Don't*

forget the mission you've been given."

"U-understood," Emma squeaked at Claudia's frighteningly cold voice.

She tried to press a foot pedal in her Nemain as three new craft left the pirate base on the asteroid. As soon as they saw the characteristics identifying Claudia's craft as the commander's, they went straight for it, not even considering other targets.

Unlike the pirates' other units, these three mobile knights appeared brand new, and seemed much more capable than their comrades.

"Sub-Lieutenant Rodman, you take one. I'll handle the other two."

"Huh?"

Claudia's Nemain charged the enemies, and Emma hurriedly raised her rifle. Its assist function automatically locked on to the enemy, but the pirate noticed and moved to avoid her shots.

"I-I'm sorry!"

What was she apologizing to the enemy for? She didn't even have time to ask herself that question. As she pulled the trigger, the enemy zigzagged her way, easily avoiding shots from her laser weapon.

The enemy aimed something that looked like a submachine gun her way. Emma hurried to evade, but her craft wouldn't move the way she wanted it to. She floundered as if drowning in outer space.

"Why?!"

As she shouted, hundreds of beams of light simultaneously rained down on her. The shield in the Nemain's left hand protected her from the onslaught, but immediately afterward, her craft suffered an intense impact; it went flying and crashed into an asteroid. Only after Emma ground to a halt did she begin to comprehend what had just happened—the enemy craft had targeted a kick at her.

"I have to take it down..." Emma struggled to right her Nemain as the enemy

closed in, swinging an axe-shaped weapon. The two machines' direct clash established a line of communication between them.

"I'm taking as many of you Banfield demons down with me as I can!"

"Eep!" Emma yelped as the enemy craft brought its axe down on her. A second later, the weapon was knocked aside. "Instructor?!"

"Don't disappoint me, Sub-Lieutenant Rodman."

Claudia's Nemain, which had just kicked away Emma's attacker, held a custom weapon in its hand—a beam whip. The Nemain skillfully manipulated the beam emerging from the weapon's handle, severing the enemy craft's limbs. Now immobilized, the enemy was helpless as Claudia's Nemain gripped it by the head and sped over to Emma.

Emma hastily looked around and saw that the other two craft targeting Claudia were already ripped to shreds. "Incredible..." she murmured.

The instructor had neutralized the two enemies in seconds. Emma felt the difference in their skill levels all too keenly. *She's a real knight...*

Claudia Beltran, a female knight in House Banfield's employ, held an AA rank. AAA was the highest rank in that house's domain. Claudia was only one level lower, and there were only a handful of AAA-ranked knights within the whole of House Banfield in the first place. Thus, Claudia's rank placed her in an elite group that only a few percent of the whole knight corps belonged to.

Claudia held the military rank of colonel in House Banfield's private forces, and had previously served as adjutant to Christiana Leta Rosebreia, the woman who stood at the very top of House Banfield's knights. Out of tens of thousands of knights, Christiana was the best of the best, so Claudia would've had to be incredibly competent to report to her.

For now, however, Claudia was here in House Banfield's domain in Christiana's place, educating the house's new knights.

Claudia thrust the immobile enemy unit in front of Emma. *"We'll call this your*

kill, Sub-Lieutenant Rodman. Finish off the pilot."

Emma could hear the enemy's voice through Claudia's comms. *"N-no! I don't want to die! Please, spare me! They just hired me—I'm not a pirate! I have a family!"*

Listening to his hoarse voice cry and wail, Emma trembled.

Claudia, however, just coldly urged her to act. *"No need for you to feel guilty, Sub-Lieutenant. It was over for him when he threw his lot in with the pirates. Now, end him."*

The enemy pilot, powerless to do anything but await his death, pleaded frantically, *"Please, let me go! I'll never have anything to do with pirates again! It's the straight and narrow for me from now on, I promise!"*



Emma's hands left the control sticks at the sound of the grown man crying and begging for his life. "I-I can't. I can't kill an enemy who surrendered."

"...I see." With no emotion, Claudia released the enemy craft...and mercilessly pierced its cockpit with her beam whip. Emma couldn't believe the instructor would be so ruthless—the enemy couldn't even resist any longer.

"N-no..." Emma's eyes widened.

Her shock didn't concern Claudia. *"House Banfield doesn't need useless knights. Return to the ship and stand by in your quarters."*

Her instructor's Nemain turned its back on her and sped back toward the pirates' hideout, where the battle still raged.

With that, Emma's first battle ended. She'd failed utterly. At the very start of her career as a knight, she'd completely crashed and burned.

Chapter 1:

A Defective D-Ranker

AFTER THE OPERATION, Emma was summoned to Claudia's office.

Claudia was clad in House Banfield's military uniform, her long light-blue hair in a ponytail. She was tall and curvy; if someone had told Emma that her instructor was a movie star, she would've believed it. What Claudia really was, however, was a knight strong enough to subdue even the fiercest of beasts with only one hand.

Her face completely expressionless, she told new knight Emma the outcome of her final assessment.

"Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman, fifty-four years old. Mediocre grades at the knight academy, outside mobile knight piloting. I see you only scored above average on marksmanship. You can't put that marksmanship to use piloting a mobile knight, though. That was your recorded assessment."

"...Yes, ma'am."

In this universe of intergalactic nations, the human lifespan was long. Emma *was* fifty-four, but she looked like she was only in her midteens, and people treated her like a girl who'd only just reached adulthood.

By this society's standards, Emma was still very young—almost childish, even.

"That said, for your final evaluation, I've put you at D rank."

"Huh?!"

Emma *had* expected bad news, but hearing Claudia's words still shocked her. "D" was the lowest rank a knight could hold. It basically implied that the knight in question wasn't even worth giving the time of day. She'd graduated from the knight academy and fought her first battle, but her instructor had essentially just evaluated her as "worthless."

“Your piloting was all over the place, and you didn’t finish off the enemy when ordered to. Your performance was worse than incompetent.”

Emma hung her head and bit her lip. Tears welled in her eyes.

Claudia just glared at her coldly. “You have no right even to be upset. You should know how much money House Banfield invested into your education.”

Knights were superhuman figures trained from childhood. If you were born a commoner, you could become a knight by studying with an instructor and using an education capsule repeatedly. But that cost the average person far too much, so commoners seldom became knights. Generally, knights came only from families with leeway to finance the process, or families that had historically produced knights regularly.

“At the moment, House Banfield doesn’t have enough knights,” Claudia told Emma. “The short-term education the knight academy provides is meant to bolster the house’s forces. That’s even more important after the war with House Berkeley not long ago.”

A few years earlier, House Banfield had waged a huge war against a fellow house of Imperial nobles, House Berkeley. Conflicts like those continued until one house completely crushed the other. While House Banfield had been victorious, it hadn’t gone without losses.

The war had been fought between hundreds of thousands of ships, and countless soldiers and knights lost their lives in the conflict. Any other house might’ve replenished its lost forces in no time, but that wasn’t true of House Banfield, which had lost its entire knight corps when its current head, Liam, came to power.

At that point, House Banfield no longer possessed any of the knight families who’d served them for generations, nor a way to educate new knights quickly. The academy had been hastily prepared for that purpose, but the domain still sorely lacked knights. After all, even a short-term education took around twenty years to complete. That wasn’t enough time to train a knight properly, but

House Banfield had no time to spare. Their dire need of new knights was the only reason Emma could try to become one.

“For what reason did you want to become a knight?” Claudia demanded suddenly.

Emma hesitantly began to respond. “To protect...”

The reason I wanted to become a knight... She thought back to the day so inextricably tied to the definition of “knight” in her mind. To the people who’d protected her and her family at that time.

“To protect people who can’t fight as a knight of justice, just like Lord Liam —!”

The moment the count’s name left Emma’s lips, Claudia’s fist slammed into her without warning. Emma went flying, slammed into the wall, and crumpled to the floor. She hadn’t even seen her instructor wind up, suggesting that Claudia’s anger was real.

“Lord Liam?! Bite your tongue!” Claudia’s face finally had an expression: pure rage.

As Emma tried to stand, her instructor turned away. “House Banfield has no need of a waste of space like you.”

Emma hung her head, crying tears of frustration.

Two weeks after that operation, Emma went jogging back on Hydra, House Banfield’s home planet. She wore a tank top and sweatpants, her shapely breasts bouncing slightly as she ran.

She was in a verdant park with bountiful nature. Other walkers and runners were visible there at the same early hour. Since she’d trained to be a knight, however, Emma didn’t look like any old runner—her athletic abilities were superhuman now.

Normal citizens jogged on a well-maintained course, but Emma raced down a

rugged path through the trees. That route was just for park maintenance; it was rarely used. Robots worked here and there along the path, while drones flew in the air above it.

As Emma sped up, fallen leaves blew into the air in her wake. She darted up a steep slope before emerging into a clearing.

“I made it!” she shouted, raising her hands in the air victoriously. Then she took out a towel and wiped away some sweat.

The clearing she’d reached was at a high elevation; from it, she could see the capital city of House Banfield’s domain. Far in the distance, she saw tall buildings that looked almost cute from this perspective. Among them was the mansion where the count who ruled Hydra resided. Though it was *called* a mansion, of course, the structure was the size of a city. It functioned as one too, so Emma herself wasn’t sure it should be referred to as a mansion.

Emma loved the view from this spot, but her expression was clouded today. She caught her breath, looking over the scenery until an old man on a park bench called out to her.

“Nice up here, isn’t it? You can really see the domain’s growth!”

“Gr-Grandpa?!”

Emma turned around, red with shame. She was embarrassed that he’d heard her shout, but also ashamed that she hadn’t noticed his presence. She was supposed to be a knight; what was she doing letting an average person sneak up on her?

She hurriedly straightened up and greeted him. “H-hey, Grandpa. It’s been a while.”

He smiled at her. “That little tomboy’s really grown up, I see.”

The elderly gentleman wasn’t actually Emma’s grandfather. He was just someone she knew because she’d come to this park to exercise ever since she was little. She often ran into him around this time of day. She didn’t know his

name, but when they met, they'd say hello and exchange small talk.

Advanced antiaging technology was widely available in this universe, so few people *looked* old. As a young girl, Emma had considered the old man in the park a curiosity. She was the one who'd spoken to him the first few times.

Since she'd known him such a long time, Emma spoke to the man casually. "I'm already an adult, Grandpa."

"Right! Well, I apologize, then. You were attending the knight academy, weren't you? Have you graduated?"

When he mentioned the academy, Emma's face fell. She sat next to the old man, thinking about how Claudia had called her a waste of space.

"I did graduate, but with the worst rank possible. I hear I was my year's only D-ranker."

"D-ranker? Were your grades poor?"

The concerned old man apparently understood how knights were ranked. Judging that he didn't need a detailed explanation, Emma nodded.

"I'm good at marksmanship, but terrible at everything else, especially piloting a mobile knight. It's the thing I most like doing, but I'm just so awful at it." She hung her head and dangled her feet under the bench, grumbling. "Everybody else got assigned to a fleet or a base, and they get to pilot new mass-produced units. But not me. They're giving me an old model to pilot and sending me out to the middle of nowhere."

"The middle of nowhere? Where might that be?"

"I doubt you've even heard of it. It's a planet House Banfield just acquired. It should be habitable, but it's been left alone so long they need to investigate first. I think it's called...Alias?"

"Alias, eh? That *is* far away."

Emma found it a bit strange that the old man even knew the planet she was talking about. That was information the average person would only possess if

they specifically went looking for it.

“Wow. I was sure you wouldn’t know about it.”

The old man snapped out of whatever reverie he was in. “I may not look it, but I used to be pretty interested in the careers of people who investigate unknown planets.”

“Oh, really? Wait—but didn’t you tell me you wanted to be an actor?” Emma was sure the old man had said that during one of their chats.

He smiled at her bashfully. “It’s a bit embarrassing to say, but you see, I tried on a few different hats in my youth. I took a very roundabout path to my current profession.”

“A roundabout path, eh...?” Emma said dispiritedly.

“Is something wrong?”

“I’m just not sure I’m really *on* the path to my dream anymore,” Emma told the kind old man. “Rather than getting there by a roundabout path, it feels more like I’ve derailed completely... I’m not sure I’ll ever be a hero of justice like Lord Liam.”

It sounded like Emma was throwing in the towel on her dreams. The old man smiled sadly. “So that’s what your dream is.” He frowned sternly, then added, “Well, you’ll certainly never be like Lord Liam if you give up here.”

“Huh?”

He rose from the bench. “After all, the count moves forward no matter what stands in his way. He walks his own path, whatever others may say about—” Then the old man noticed Emma’s eyes on him.

“Do you know Lord Liam, Grandpa?”

He clearly grew flustered at the question. “O-of course not. It’s just that when you live for as long as I have, you sense the character of the lord in power.”

“That’s how it works? I’ve heard a lot about how bad it was before the

current lord, but firsthand, I only know about him. I don't really have anything to compare him to."

The old man smiled wryly at her response. "That's only natural... Well, I really should be going." He began heading to work again, but before he left, he turned back to Emma. "I'm sure you can do it, Emma. You'll be a hero of justice."

"You really think so?"

"Nothing will come of doubting yourself. Charging forward on blind faith is a privilege of the young."

"I should just believe in myself, huh? Well, it's easy enough to say that..."

"Hm. Think about it this way. Giving up is something you can do anytime."

"You're right... Thanks, Grandpa. I feel a little better now. Yeah—it's not over yet!"

Emma waved at the old man with a grin. Once she could no longer see him, she slapped her face with both hands to fire herself up.

"Yeah. I can't give up yet. I'm gonna be a knight of justice!"

House Banfield's mansion was vast. In fact, it would've been more accurate to call it a city than a mansion.

In one of its chambers was the de facto head of House Banfield's knight order: Christiana Leta Rosebreia. At one point, she'd served as head knight officially, but she'd been removed from that position after incurring their lord's wrath. But since no one could replace her, she still led the knights in practice, if not in title.

She'd summoned her adjutant Claudia to her room—a woman she trusted more than anyone else.

Christiana smiled as Claudia stood before her at ease. "It seems you did a good job running things while I was gone."

“It’s an honor to hear that, ma’am.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t extend to your training of the rookies, though. You’re too strict, Claudia.”

Claudia didn’t react to her superior officer’s judgment. In fact, rather than being cowed by it, she objected. “Knights who haven’t seen real combat are worthless.”

“True enough, but you need to be gentler with fledglings right out of the knight academy. Throwing them into combat first thing... That’s too much to ask. You also judge them too harshly.”

Christiana must’ve reviewed Claudia’s work remotely; she now had criticisms of Claudia’s assessment metrics.

“We don’t need incompetent allies who only serve to hold us back.” Claudia smiled, but it was cold.

It wasn’t as if Christiana couldn’t sympathize with her adjutant. Claudia had been betrayed by less competent allies in the past, leading to her capture by space pirates. She’d been harsh on other people as well as herself even before that, but her capture had soured her further on others. The only people she truly considered allies were those in the same boat—genuinely talented knights who’d been captured by space pirates, just as she had been. She saw everyone else as little more than a pawn.

But although Christiana sympathized, as Claudia’s superior officer, she still had to reprimand her adjutant. “I ordered you to train knights we can make use of, not separate the wheat from the chaff.” She smiled dauntingly at her subordinate.

Knowing the difference in their abilities, Claudia wiped the smile from her own face. Still, her true feelings seeped into her voice. “I apologize. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“No need. House Banfield’s too busy to keep you in the instructor’s seat any

longer.” Christiana projected a document in front of Claudia.

The adjutant narrowed her eyes. “What’s this...?”

The document described various weapons they’d found space pirates utilizing.

“We’ve identified people sharing weapons with space pirates,” Christiana explained.

“Arms dealers?” More than a few merchants would sell weapons to pirates if large sums of money were involved.

Christiana brought up a second document. “We discovered a pirate armory inside the planet House Banfield just acquired. We don’t have the exact coordinates yet, but we’re sure it’s there somewhere.”

Claudia scowled. She was repulsed by space pirates and anyone connected to them.

“I want you to crush this armory before anyone else finds out about it,” Christiana ordered her adjutant.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter 2:

The Border Region Security Force

AT A MILITARY PORT on the planet of Hydra, families and friends bid their loved ones goodbye as fresh academy graduates boarded shuttles bound for their assignments. As the youths headed out into space to the warships awaiting them, their families waved tearful farewells. Other graduates boarded spaceships that had landed on Hydra; all were headed elsewhere to begin their new careers.

Standing in a waiting room, Emma wore her formal uniform as she waited for transportation to take her to her assignment. She pressed her forehead to a window and sighed as she watched it all.

A counter in the waiting room was stocked with free drinks and snacks for the knights, and waiters and waitresses took orders from recruits not yet departing. The room was full of fresh new knight academy graduates, beautiful young men and women flashing excited smiles at each other. As knights, they were now part of an exclusive group within the Empire—one with all sorts of privileges, including the special treatment they were receiving today from the military.

Emma stood at a distance from her excited cohort, sulking on her own. One of her peers, a knight named Kalua Beckley, watched her with some amusement. Kalua wore the same formal uniform as Emma, but looked much more like an adult in it.

“Everyone’s so excited,” Kalua said. “I guess that’s only natural, though. With the instructors breathing down our necks all the time at the academy, it’s not like we had time to goof off.”

“I guess not.”

“Now that we’re knights, we won’t be able to keep guys off us. I bet you could take your pick of anyone you wanted, Emma.”

“I guess.”

Kalua sighed. “I get why you’re not in the best mood, but we’re winners now that we’ve managed to become knights at all,” she comforted her friend. “You should hold your head up high, girl. It’s a waste to mope around like that when you’re finally a real knight.”

“It’s not like I don’t know that. I just...”

Knighthood was a symbol of success in this society. Neither Emma nor Kalua came from particularly wealthy families, and normally, they could never have achieved knighthood. It was sheer luck that they were granted the opportunity because House Banfield needed new knights.

Another of their peers, a boy named Russell Bonner, came over while the two were talking. He was from a family that had served as government officials for generations, one of a select few families within House Banfield’s domain that could claim some familial influence.

“You know you don’t have the abilities to truly call yourself a knight,” he told Emma with a smile. “It’s right of you to keep that in mind.”

Kalua grimaced openly at Russell’s intrusion, not even hiding her annoyance. She wasn’t the only recent graduate who felt that way about him. “And you’re so much better than Emma, right?” she asked him with obvious disdain.

Russell wore a custom dress uniform with far more ornamentation than the other knights, but it wasn’t something he’d prepared himself; it was issued to those who graduated with particularly high marks. Wearing the special uniform smugly, he looked down on the other normally dressed knights.

“Of course I am. I’m one of the elites, with grades in the top hundred of our fellow graduates.”

Upon graduation, the top hundred students received the rank of lieutenant. As knights, their rank was C—the same as their classmates—but they started in a better position within House Banfield’s military, on the fast track to success.

Kalua shrugged and looked away from Russell. “What does an elite want with us, hm?”

In response, Russell looked not to Kalua, but to Emma. “Well, we aren’t likely ever to see each other again, so I figured I’d say my final farewells. The best assignments you two can hope for will be at least a stone’s throw from the home planet, right? On the other hand, the chosen few like me will accompany our lord to the Capital Planet.”

Emma’s eyes widened. No one would expect brand-new knights to be assigned to the Capital Planet—the Algrand Empire’s home planet—with the lord of the domain.

“You’re assigned to the Capital Planet?”

“Of course. The count’s in training now, right? Protecting him is the duty of the chosen few.”

House Banfield’s lord was still young and was currently in the middle of training to become a full-fledged Algrand Empire noble. He would spend time on the Capital Planet for that purpose. To have received an assignment to guard him, Russell was surely talented.

Emma felt envious, and at the same time, she lamented her own position.

Russell clearly just wanted to brag about his assignment. “By the way, Emma...” he began.

“Wh-what?”

“Would you tell me where *you* were assigned? I’m just curious where they’re sending *defective D-rankers* like you.”

The emphasis he put on the phrase caught the attention of those around them; the eyes of all the knights in the waiting room focused on Emma. Most of their gazes were disdainful, though a few were pitying instead. Emma couldn’t stand to have them all looking at her like that.

“Hey, don’t listen to him,” Kalua whispered in her ear. “You’re a knight now,

just like he is.”

Having heard Kalua’s attempts to comfort Emma, Russell scoffed. “You’re wrong. A Dranker isn’t a knight. That rank indicates nothing save just how defective you are. House Banfield’s knights don’t need D-rankers like you.”

Emma bit her lip when Russell called her unneeded.

His departure time was approaching quickly, so he turned his back to them and said his farewells.

“Looks like it’s time for me to go. Let me just give you a piece of advice before I do.” Looking over his shoulder, he told Emma, “It takes courage to know when to retreat too. You should turn in your qualifications before you drag everyone in your unit down with you.”

With that, Russell left the waiting room. His brazen attitude didn’t win him any friends, but he was undoubtedly one of the most talented among his peers.

Kalua set her hand on Emma’s shoulder. “Forget him. He’s just showboating.”

“I-I know.” Emma forced a smile, but on the inside, Russell’s words devastated her.

When Emma boarded her shuttle, she found it full of soldiers assigned to the same ship she was. Something about them was strange, though.

Is it me, or are they all total slobs?!

Clinging to her luggage, Emma made herself as small as she could, posture ramrod straight as she sat in her seat. Cold sweat dripped down her neck as she looked at the sloppily dressed soldiers riding on the shuttle with her. They had stubble, or messy hair, or stained clothing; some even drank or slept.

At the knight academy, they always said discipline was strict in the army. Was that not true?

The shuttle approached a larger ship. Surrounded by rather frightening

figures, Emma desperately awaited docking. Her face twitched as the ship came into view through the window.

Yikes...

The ship's simple, monolith-like construction marked it as a carrier, but it was clearly ancient. It was at least two generations old, something dating back to House Banfield's erstwhile private military. This ancient, roughly patched ship was where Emma had been assigned.

"Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman, reporting for duty!"

Emma saluted nervously to the commander, who was looking over digital documents in his office. The man didn't even spare her a glance. He simply continued dealing with the documents in front of him, an annoyed look on his face.

She awaited a response until the commander, Colonel Tim Baker, sighed, leaned back in his chair, and replied unenthusiastically, "Welcome, Sub-Lieutenant. I never even dreamed our little operation would get its own knight."

"Er..." Emma wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"Everyone's scrambling for knights right now, since we don't have enough of them," Colonel Baker continued offhandedly. "I'm just wondering what exactly you did to land yourself on our beloved Melea, the prime destination for demotions."

"...I received a D rank on my final evaluation," Emma answered honestly.

Her commander rose from his chair and stretched. "Ah. Makes sense."

"Huh?"

Emma had expected the colonel to react with anger, but he didn't seem bothered by the news at all. Rather, he'd apparently never had any expectations of Emma from the jump.

“After our escort ships arrive, we’re to head to the planet Alias and conduct an investigation, as well as keep the peace there. Until just recently, Alias belonged to another house.”

The planet had been part of House Berkeley’s domain. House Banfield had only acquired it recently, and the Melea was the first ship they’d dispatched to assess the new planet.

“The planet has no settlers, however. It’s currently devoid of intelligent life.”

“Er...” Again, Emma wasn’t sure how to respond.

“So there’s no peace to keep,” Colonel Baker said frankly. “The guys up top probably just want to send some forces there, since it belongs to us now.” He clearly had mixed feelings about his superiors. The orders he then issued his new knight were very out of keeping with the kind of directions she *should* have received at this point. “I suppose you’ll be in charge of a mobile knight platoon, but you shouldn’t expect to be very busy—there won’t be anything for you to do.”

In other words, she’d have no chance to make anything of herself here.

Y-you can’t be serious!

Assigned to the Melea carrier with no opportunity to make a name for herself, Emma found herself sinking into despair on day one of her new job.

The Melea’s hangar was a mess, with mobile knight parts and scrap metal strewn everywhere. As the new commander of a platoon based there, Emma began to see just what she was getting herself into: even more trouble.

A middle-aged man with short brown hair and sideburns connected to his beard greeted her with a hearty laugh. He wasn’t a knight; Warrant Officer Doug Walsh was merely a mobile knight pilot, and a member of Emma’s new platoon.

“Cute new sub-lieutenant we’ve got,” he said.

Despite his intimidating features, he had a friendly attitude and well-trained physique. Still, such a remark was disrespectful of a knight like Emma.

“Don’t be rude, Doug,” a young woman chastised him. She turned to Emma. “I’m Private First Class Molly Burrell, the squad mechanic. I’m so relieved... I was worried the new commander would be scary!”

Molly had red hair in pigtails; she looked around Emma’s age. Emma’s face twitched at her casual manner. From how the mechanic acted, it was hard to say whether she’d actually trained in the army. Her outfit was an issue too. She wore work clothes, but only on her bottom half. Around her chest she’d merely wrapped a simple piece of cloth, leaving a *lot* of skin exposed. The combination of her clothes and her attitude left Emma completely floundering.

“Pl-pleasure to make your acquaintance...?”

“You’re so stiff, Sub-Lieutenant!” Molly laughed and turned to the last person in the hangar. “This other one’s Warrant Officer Cramer—Larry. Say something already.”

The young man Molly indicated sat on a box of spare parts. Even though his new commanding officer had just arrived, he was playing a portable game system, holding a controller and wearing a visor-style monitor on his head.

The man paused his game unenthusiastically. “Warrant Officer Larry Cramer. Nice to meet you, I guess. But I’m sure we won’t have time to get to know each other.”

“Don’t say something so ominous!” Emma objected, taken aback. “I’m not going to die, and I don’t plan on letting anyone in my platoon die either!”

Larry looked at her like she’d sprouted another head, then realized she’d misunderstood. “Sorry, that’s not what I meant,” he sighed. “I just doubt our little platoon on the Melea will last long. Soon enough, they’ll either disband us or send us off someplace in the middle of nowhere for no reason.”

“Huh? B-but there’s no telling what could happen in space, is there?”

“Well, what do you think’s gonna happen out here in the boonies? We’re not gonna battle for anything but training, right? Besides, I could be discharged in another few years.” He got back to his game.

“I swear, kids these days have no motivation...” Doug scratched his head. “Well, that’s the kind of squad we are. Good luck, little lady!”

“It’s Sub-Lieutenant! I may not look it, but I’m a full-fledged knight, you know!”

Larry paused his game again and peered at Emma appraisingly. After a moment, he sighed, sounding disappointed. “You sure *don’t* look it. How impressive can you really be, assigned to this junk heap?”

Molly puffed her cheeks. “Don’t you think that’s a little rude to Emma, Larry?” Of course, it was just as rude of her to call her commanding officer “Emma.”

With an awkward look, Doug shrugged at Emma. “Well, just take it easy while you’re here.”

Emma stood there, stunned. *Th-this is my platoon? Give me a break... What am I even supposed to do with them?!*

Chapter 3:

The Masterpiece Moheive

HAVING CHANGED into sportswear, Emma was working out in high gravity in the Melea's training room. The room had tons of equipment, but it was all old, and some of it didn't even work anymore. Had they purposely avoided repairing it? Or had no one even noticed that it wasn't functioning?

Although she was a bit uneasy about her future, Emma was making sure to keep her training up. She was the only person using this room, however, and she couldn't see any signs of other crew members having done so.

"Haaah...haaah... I-I'm done."

As she finished working out, she glanced at a clock displaying the ship's current time. The scheduled training period had just about ended.

"No one's even *here*!" Emma wailed, clutching her head. Other soldiers should've been utilizing this room for their own training, but the Melea's discipline was so lax, she was the only one who'd come in.

Alone in the spacious training room, Emma caught her breath, wiping sweat off her body. She had no idea how the atmosphere on this ship had actually come to exist.

"How did it get so bad here?" she wondered.

When Lord Liam took over House Banfield, the military had undergone huge reforms. Disciplined, properly trained soldiers replaced everyone not pulling their weight. As far as Emma knew, the military was much stricter under their stern new count. She couldn't understand why reality wasn't aligning with what she'd been taught.

She heaved a sigh and headed for the showers.

Later, in the Melea's hangar, Emma barked, "I'm not happy, everyone!"

Since Doug, Larry, and Molly had failed to show up for morning training, she'd lined them up in front of her and was looking at them sternly. Given how the universe was beating the stuffing out of her lately, though, she didn't appear very confident. The trio must've noticed that, because they all acted like they'd rather not be listening.

Molly laughed and spoke to her as if she were a friend. "You're way too serious, Emma. Nobody actually trains on this ship."

"That's the problem!" Emma just wanted to do her duty as platoon commander.

Doug gave her a bemused smile. "You sure are motivated, kiddo."

"Don't address me as 'kiddo'! Call me 'Commander'! I'm your *commander*! And why do I smell alcohol on you, Warrant Officer Walsh?!" Emma glared at him.

Doug just smiled again. "Ahh...is yesterday's booze still on me?"

"It's *noon*! Can you do your job, smelling like alcohol every day?!"

Molly laughed. "Doug's *always* like this. He's got booze stashed in his pocket right now, I'm sure."

Doug groaned, his secret revealed. "Come on. It's the only fun I get to have in the army. Cut me some slack."

Red-faced, Emma turned to Molly. "We'll address the drinking later. You're next, Private First Class Burrell! Why weren't you at training? Didn't I instruct you all to attend?"

Yet again, Molly laughed. "I think training had started by the time I remembered that. Actually, I'm not even sure when training *is*."

Speechless, Emma finally turned to Larry. He was ignoring her completely, playing his handheld game again. His attitude pushed Emma past the limits of her patience. "Can you put that game away already?!"

Larry looked up, frowning in blatant displeasure. “This is such a pain.”

“A-a *pain*? What’s that supposed to mean? We’re soldiers, and this is our duty —”

“Like I said, it’s a pain.” Shooting down her valid arguments, Larry put his hands in his pockets and left the room without waiting for permission.

As he left, Emma’s mouth flapped open and closed. “Er...wait...! This is...the military...”

Military regulations were supposed to be strict. Behavior like Larry’s *should* have been unthinkable. If Emma’s former instructor Claudia were here, she would surely have reprimanded Larry thoroughly.

And that was supposed to be Emma’s job now. She’d been taught that, as a commander, she needed to be strict with her troops. Her fists clenched in frustration.

“Can I have a moment, kiddo?” Doug asked.

“Don’t refer to me as ‘kiddo’! I’m—”

“*Commander*, then. Would you accompany me for a moment, ma’am?”

Emma flinched under his intense gaze, but quickly straightened back up.

Watching the two, Molly shrugged and began to return to work. “I’ll just get back to maintenance, then.”

Watching her leave, Emma felt anxious about the future of her platoon of misfits. *They’re all problem children...and I guess I’m the same.* She deflated as she realized someone else would likely see her that way, since she couldn’t pilot a mobile knight.

Doug brought Emma to the section of the hangar containing the mobile knights her platoon would pilot. The two watched Molly perform maintenance in a powered suit at the foot of the craft.

Emma looked up at the mobile knights. They were rather simply shaped, designed to look like soldiers in helmets, and hardly ornamented—though there was something like a visor on the head of the commander’s mobile knight to distinguish it.

Doug looked up at the units. “Know what these are called?” he asked Emma.

“They’re Moheives, aren’t they? I know that much,” she responded peevishly.

Emma was annoyed that Doug didn’t think she’d know the craft’s name; she felt like he was belittling her. The knight academy had pounded all the knowledge she’d need into her head.

But Doug just looked up at the Moheives gravely. He didn’t appear to be mocking her at all. “They’re *second-generation* Moheives, to be precise. The fourth generation is currently in mainstream use, so these are two generations old.”

“Huh? Second generation?” It turned out that, when she scrutinized the craft, a lot of details conflicted with her knowledge of Moheive units.

“The originals were just awful, apparently,” Doug continued. “If two went up against one of that era’s other mass-produced units, they were only powerful enough to just barely beat the enemy.”

“Huh? But aren’t Moheives used all over the Empire now?”

They were common in the Imperial Army, and nobles often added them to their private armies. It was hard to call the craft outstanding, but they were ubiquitous.

“Well, you could make three first-generation Moheives for the price of one of that period’s mass-produced units. And they were highly functional, easily serviceable machines. Nobles bought ’em because of the cheap maintenance fees. That’s why the Moheive is called ‘the masterpiece of the Empire.’”



In short, the fact that they could be cheaply produced and maintained led to their widespread use across the Empire, although they didn't perform particularly well. But why was the Melea deploying these old models?

Before Emma could ask that, Doug told her, "They're just like us."

"Like us?"

"Cheap, disposable goods to be used up and thrown out." Doug had smiled a lot during their conversations thus far, but he was dead serious now.

Yet Emma couldn't accept what he said. "We're not disposable! We—"

"Is that what you really think? You must be blind, kid." Now he looked disgusted, like there was a bitter taste in his mouth. "I've belonged to House Banfield's army since the count two generations ago."

"Two generations ago? I thought the old army had been dismantled."

When Lord Liam took over, a massive reorganization replaced almost all the forces in House Banfield's private army—mostly with soldiers sent from the Empire. Old generals were disposed of.

Putting his hands in his pockets, Doug told Emma about the past as someone who'd lived it. "Things were bad before the reforms. Real bad. All we were armed with was old weapons we couldn't even hope would beat pirates. But we were told to fight anyway and sent into battle over and over. Guys joined up with hopes and dreams, but six months later, only half of 'em were left. After ten years, eighty percent would be dead, and the survivors didn't give a crap about anything."

"B-but that's what the reforms were—"

"Sure. That's a normal opinion. But under those circumstances, we were doing everything we could!" Doug shouted.

Molly looked over in surprise, but returned to work immediately. She must've decided there was no need to get involved.

“We didn’t fight for those morons in charge,” continued Doug, who clearly harbored an intense hatred of the nobility. “We risked our lives for the people of the domain. If we hadn’t, *they* would’ve suffered. We never fought for our *lord* one damn time. Then, when the new count took over, he just threw us all away.”

Emma had been listening silently, but when Lord Liam came up, she couldn’t keep quiet. “That’s not true!”

Doug would hear none of it. “It is. Now the Melea’s all that’s left. This ship where anyone he doesn’t need ends up is the smoking gun. It was the new count who sent us all here!”

“W-well...”

As Doug vented his frustration to Emma, a blood vessel bulged on his forehead. “I’m sure the citizens are thrilled too. That pathetic army was finally straightened up, and people don’t have to live in fear of pirates anymore.” From the perspective of someone like Doug, who’d fought as hard as he could, the very citizens he’d tried to protect might as well have betrayed him.

Emma began to argue but realized nothing she said was likely to get through to him. She closed her mouth.

“You met our commander, didn’t you? Believe it or not, the colonel used to be a total hothead, always risking his life for the people of House Banfield. Yet the new count cut us off all the same. We were disposed of just as easily as these guys.” He indicated the mobile knight units.

Moheive components were easily replaceable when they became unrepairable. Doug was trying to tell Emma that this ship’s crew was the same.

“‘You can’t trust the old army.’ That’s what the new guys say, and they send us to the most remote regions they can. I bet they’re hoping we’ll just die out here. After all, the only craft they’ll give us are too old to be any use.”

“Th-the army’s dealing with plenty of other issues,” Emma objected.

Where to concentrate forces, and what to equip them with, were financial questions as well. Some people might not have *anything* to use if they weren't using old technology. Emma could think of all sorts of reasons why the situation might be what it was.

Yet Doug clearly resented House Banfield—and its current lord—and wasn't interested in what she had to say. "Their reasoning doesn't matter. Either way, they've thrown us out. That's the bottom line. On top of that, everyone here has been in the military so long they have nowhere else to go. Know why Molly was assigned here, kid?"

"N-no." Emma glanced at Molly, who was working more diligently than Emma would ever have anticipated, given her usual attitude.

"She's an orphan. She only joined the army to gain the skills and qualifications she needs to survive. It's not like she wanted to be a soldier."

The army was always recruiting, so plenty of civilians enlisted because they had no other prospects, then learned a skill and returned to regular society afterward. Qualifications that cost a considerable sum in the civilian world could be gained for free in the army. In exchange, of course, you needed to spend several decades as a soldier.

"She may not take much else seriously, but her skills as a mechanic are the real deal, and she never slacks on maintenance work. When she focuses, though, she tends to get sucked in. Her superiors didn't like that, which is why she ended up here."

"I see..." Emma looked back at Molly, working on the Moheives. She was sweating, but seemed happy.

Doug told Emma about her other subordinate too. "It's the same with Larry. He wanted to be a knight at first."

"Larry did?" Emma was surprised to hear that.

"To be a knight, you gotta use an education capsule several times while

you're still a kid, right? Larry was just too old to qualify. When he looks at you, he probably feels jealous. He was a lot like you when he first got sent here, you know."

Emma didn't know what to think of that. Larry was so unmotivated now. "I can't even imagine that."

"I bet. But guys like that rot out here too."

There were even more problems with Emma's new workplace than she'd thought. She was feeling more and more anxious about her future here.

Passing by Emma on his way out, Doug made one more comment. "Everyone here's already lost heart. Sorry, but don't drag us into your little play-army."

Play-army.

Emma now knew why the Melea's crew was so unlike what she expected in the military. She considered what to do, but didn't come up with anything. What *could* she do? What *should* she do? If her platoon had "lost heart," how could she get them back on their feet?

She looked at the ceiling, tears in her eyes. "I really am a failure as a knight." Healing these soldiers' broken spirits was a daunting task, and Emma was sure she lacked the skill to carry it out. Wiping her tears, she tried to pump herself up. "I can't just let it end here! Even if there's nothing I can do, I..."

Molly must've reached a stopping point in her maintenance work. She approached Emma. "I don't mind you getting all fired up, but what are you gonna do, exactly?"

Emma flushed with embarrassment, eyes darting this way and that. "W-well... For now, train, I guess. I want to get stronger, so..." She laughed bashfully.

"I didn't think you were a meathead, Emma..." Molly said, exasperated.

Maybe she *was* a meathead. She'd always preferred being active to using her brain. On the other hand, she'd also always admired intellectual knights. The person she idolized most wasn't only strong, but also possessed a keen intellect.

Since her goal was to become like him, she also strove to be a knight blessed with both brains and brawn. She hadn't yet achieved those brains, however, so she couldn't say anything to contradict Molly.

"W-well, getting stronger is just a goal of mine...but I guess I *am* kind of a meathead." Stripped of her "dignified commanding officer" facade, Emma sulked.

Molly laughed. "You're a lot of fun, you know that, Emma? You don't really seem like a knight at all."

"Y-you don't think so? I'm really *not* good enough, am I?" she asked, deflated.

"Before I came here, I saw another squad's knights. And, well, you know what I'm like, right? No matter where I went, everyone always got mad at me. They were all like, 'Shape up!' You know?"

Molly shrugged, her smile a little sad. She'd obviously been through plenty of hardships before her assignment to the Melea, although she didn't go into detail. The mechanic stretched and walked to a container full of spare parts.

Emma cocked her head. "You're going to work more?"

Molly should have been finished, but she carried her tools toward the mountain of parts anyway. She plucked one piece from the mound and began scrutinizing it. "Oh, this? This isn't work. It's my hobby."

"Hobby?"

"Yep. House Banfield's pretty thorough about collecting space junk, right?"

"Y-yeah. I've heard they're really strict about it."

"Well, these are treasures from that trash collection."

There was "junk"—debris—in space for all kinds of reasons. It was common courtesy to clean it up, since it could be dangerous if overlooked, but very few Imperial nobles actually respected that rule. House Banfield was an exception—its military had strict orders to gather any debris it came across, and thoroughly. The Melea had been dispatched for such cleanup operations many times. Each

time, Molly collected whichever parts she thought she could make use of.

She'd filled a section of the hangar with mobile knight components and weapons, making the space her own. Such behavior wasn't normally condoned, but the Melea had no intention of sanctioning her for her actions. That showed just how little discipline there was aboard the ship.

All the same, Emma found herself fascinated by Molly's collection of components. "We weren't officially issued those parts?"

The hardware and weapons hanging on the wall were well maintained and could be used anytime. Molly had scavenged them from space debris and fixed them up herself.

Molly rubbed her nose bashfully. "It was a lot of work, you know. This baby's my favorite!"

The weapon she was talking up was a stake with a cylinder around it. Emma wasn't familiar with it. "How do you use that?" she asked, tilting her head.

Molly touched the stake, explaining excitedly, "You get close to an enemy and fire the stake into them! You hardly ever see one these days, so it's a real treasure! It's called a 'pile bunker.'"

Hearing that name, Emma recalled the weapon from the information drilled into her at the knight academy. A pile bunker utilized gunpowder for a heavy-impact attack on an enemy at close range. It required a highly skilled pilot, since the user had to get incredibly close to drive the stake-like "pile" into an enemy. The model Molly had salvaged was the kind you could only fire once.

"That *is* rare..." Emma acknowledged. "I'm surprised you found something like that."

"I was so excited when I did!"

Seeing how happy Molly was, Emma couldn't bring herself to tell the mechanic to stop what she'd been doing. All she felt was admiration of her skill.

I guess it's hard to say without actually using all this stuff... But if Molly fixed it

up, she's a pretty good mechanic, isn't she? Refurbishing such a variety of parts and weapons would've required proficiency.

As Emma looked over it all, Molly scratched her head, averting her eyes. "I'm taking up too much space with that stuff, aren't I? Even Doug's complaining about it lately. Larry's not happy with it either."

Emma knew her position required her to stop Molly, who'd apparently been causing some annoyance. But... "If you use all this space without permission, it *is* a problem. But what if you *had* permission? I could talk to Colonel Baker for you."

Molly looked surprised for a moment, then broke into a smile and hugged Emma. "Thank you, Emma!"

"Huh? S-sure!"

When Molly pulled her into a hug, expressing her gratitude, Emma was so happy she nearly cried tears of joy. It felt like the first time someone had actually welcomed her since she'd arrived on the Melea.

Molly pulled away, looking up at the Moheive she'd just been working on. It appeared to be the commander's craft—Emma's mobile knight. "All right! Guess I should finish up your mobile knight, then!"

"That one's mine, huh?"

Peering at the one Moheive with a different helmet, Molly informed her excitedly, "You know, you have to adjust this craft differently when a knight uses it, rather than a regular pilot. This was my first time setting one up that way. In fact, this is the only machine on the Melea that has to be adjusted specifically for a knight. It was pretty hard—it's a real pain!"

Despite calling the process a "pain," Molly seemed attached to the craft. Emma found herself growing rather fond of the girl.

"Hunh," she murmured. "So, this is my mobile knight..."

"Yep! Careful not to break it, okay? Getting a new one would be super hard!"

Molly's last warning was serious, which put a bit of a damper on Emma's mood. "I-I'll do my best..."

The next day, Emma went to the training room during her break and found Molly there as well, in her own sportswear.

"You got this," The mechanic encouraged Emma airily as the knight bench-pressed several times her weight.

"Mmph!"

Molly clapped at the sight of her commander lifting so much weight; Emma wasn't particularly burly. "That's amazing! I don't think the guys could press that much."

As she took a break and caught her breath, Emma explained frankly that any knight would be capable of that. "I *am* still a knight, you know. Oh... I *was* always good at physical stuff, though. I got good grades in physical subjects... Pr-pretty good, anyway."

"You really *are* a meathead." Molly laughed, but her face soon turned serious. "What are you gonna do now? I don't think working hard on your own is gonna change anything."

Emma herself was well aware that her efforts wouldn't lead to a sea change on the Melea. "It's fine. I'm just putting my nose to the grindstone for my own sake."

"Not for everyone else?"

"Well, in a way, it's for everyone else... I always wanted to be a knight who fought for justice, you know?"

A knight who fought for justice. In her mind's eye, Emma saw a knight stronger than anyone else, able to overcome anything. She pictured the Avid, and the knight who piloted it—in short, House Banfield's current lord.

"I don't think a knight who fought for justice could leave this situation as is,"

she told Molly.

Molly looked a little exasperated, but she also smiled with amusement. “You’re kind of funny, Emma. You’re like a boy.”

“I-I’m not a boy! But I do get that a lot,” Emma pouted. Part of her still wanted to protest anytime someone told her that, although she was used to hearing it and didn’t really disagree. It had even been recommended to her that she have a sex change. But she’d rejected that; it didn’t appeal to her. She didn’t *want* to be a boy—she was perfectly fine with her birth sex.

“You’re cute when you pout, though.”

When Molly called her “cute,” Emma flushed. “C-cut it out! How am I supposed to react to that?!”

A blaring alarm cut their lively conversation short.

An announcement by a clearly unmotivated operator followed. “*The space carrier Melea will enter the atmosphere in one hour. All hands, stand by in your designated stations.*”

Chapter 4:

The Third Platoon

ALIAS, THE PLANET formerly belonging to House Berkeley, was full of nature. However, that didn't necessarily prove it was a habitable environment. Its viability as a settlement would depend on its native lifeforms. House Berkeley had left the planet completely untouched, so House Banfield had to do its own investigation.

The Melea was classified as a light carrier—sturdy, if nothing else—so it could handle entering a planet's atmosphere. As soon as they landed, the investigation team on board began establishing their base. They set up heavy machinery that started erecting buildings as if it were a 3D printer. As the simple base took shape, the team unloaded utilities they'd need for their investigation from the ship.

In the hangar, Emma watched her platoon with irritation, holding her helmet. She alone wore the required pilot suit. "You two forgot we're investigating an *undeveloped* planet, didn't you?"

The army required forces to wear spacesuits on undeveloped planets in case of unknown dangers. Even if the air was breathable, there could be viruses and the like. Yet Doug and Larry were only dressed in ground-pilot suits providing little more protection than ordinary jackets. Molly was even worse—she wore her usual outfit, exposing lots of skin. Only Emma was in a proper space-grade pilot suit.

Larry sighed and looked Emma over. "Hmm," he grunted appraisingly.

She covered her chest with her helmet, embarrassed. "Wh-what?"

After looking her up and down, he scoffed, "I heard knights got special pilot suits, but they're not so different from ours."

Special suits *were* generally issued to the "superhuman" knights, but on the

Melea, Emma had received the standard suit. According to Colonel Baker, “We ain’t got pilot suits for knights.”

“The Melea didn’t have any knight pilot suits. I’m wearing a normal one,” Emma huffed.

“Perfect for a demoted knight like you,” Larry chuckled.

“Hey. That was too far,” Doug scolded him.

“...Sorry.” Larry was generally harsh with Emma, but seemingly couldn’t talk back to Doug.

I’m their commander. I have to shape up, Emma told herself, watching the pair. “Anyway, I want you two in real suits! Now that I’m commander of the Third Platoon, we’ll be following the rules.”

Emma’s squad was the Third Platoon in the First Company; their Moheives bore the number “103.” Though Emma tried to remain dignified, she was the Third Platoon’s youngest member, which did little for her gravitas. Neither of these subordinates thought much of her, but Larry was particularly disrespectful. When Emma tried to act like their commander, he went after her shortcomings ruthlessly.

“I’m not sure what the point is of listening to a D-rank knight...” he continued. “Come to think of it, the ‘D’ stands for ‘defective,’ right?”

“Wha—?! What does *that* have to do with anything?!”

Being a defective D-ranker was Emma’s harsh reality. She’d become one of the knights she so admired, but at D rank, she could hardly count herself among their number. That made it hard to act superior to her subordinates. Was she really qualified to be their commander? While that thought plagued her, it was impossible to do her job.

As she and Larry squabbled, Doug glanced around them. “Why don’t you get the lay of the land, kid? The investigators are wearing work clothes too, right?”

Emma looked and saw just what Doug described. “Er...I suppose, but...”

“They apparently already did an initial investigation. Ours’ll just wrap things up.”

“Huh?”

“House Banfield always sends drones in first, after all.” Apparently, the unmanned drones they’d initially dispatched had determined that nothing on Alias presented an extreme risk to human life.

Emma hurriedly activated a device on her wrist to check her terminal. She took a look, but she’d received no such report. “I-I haven’t heard anything about that. It’s not in the Melea’s database, either.” She’d confirmed her mission details beforehand, but somehow, her two subordinates had more information than she did.

Larry explained why the information wasn’t in the database. “Investigators came by to ask about collecting the drones while we’re here.”

“I-I didn’t know that. Huh? W-wait a second. They came by to talk, but I didn’t hear anything about it...?”

“Well, I didn’t tell you,” Larry said offhandedly, not sounding remorseful in the least.

“What?! Why not?!”

“I didn’t think I needed to.”

“That’s not your decision to make!”

“Leave it at that, you two,” ordered Doug, who must’ve gotten sick of their arguing. “Anyway, that’s the story. So we can wear ground equipment—not that it matters, since we won’t have any reason to leave the cockpit. Okay with you, kid?”

Emma looked away and nodded. “Fine.”

Seeing her sulk, Larry spat, “Doesn’t take much to bring you down, does it?”

Emma left, and Molly approached Doug and Larry. The pair sighed at the obviously angry way she strode over.

Molly got right up in Larry's face. "Are you picking on Emma, Larry? You can't leave her out like that!"

"What's it have to do with a mechanic like you?"

"Hey, I'm a member of the Third Platoon just like you are!"

With Molly breathing down his neck, Larry looked uncomfortable.

Doug agreed with the mechanic, crossing his arms. "I get why you resent knights and why you want to take it out on the kid. But she's got nothing to do with that, and you went too far this time." Knowing Larry's past, Doug didn't criticize him too harshly.

Molly had no such reservations. "You're too soft on him, Doug! I want you both to apologize to Emma later."

Larry scowled and ground his teeth, spitting back, "Knights are pieces of trash, every single one of them. She'll start looking down on us soon, just you wait."

With that, he headed for his own Moheive.

There was still time before they needed to deploy, so Emma went to see the head investigator, still wearing her space-grade pilot suit. She could've gotten more details from Doug and Larry, but she was suspicious of what they'd told her, so she wanted to confirm everything with the person in charge. She was sick of coming off like a helpless D-Ranker.

But when she heard what the man in charge said, her mouth hung wide open. "Huh?!" she exclaimed.

He was a broad-shouldered man wearing coveralls, with a bushy beard, and Emma's reaction bewildered him somewhat. "Yep. I definitely said to get all the captains together. Didn't want to have to talk to everyone separately, you know, but I figured we should chat, since we're all on the same ship and

everything.”

He explained that he’d gathered the mobile knight squad leaders to explain the mission’s particulars. Now that he’d learned he’d missed a squad leader, he apparently wasn’t sure what to say.

“When I asked, they told me everyone was there, but...I guess not...?”

From the head investigator’s confusion, Emma surmised what had happened. Larry hadn’t merely neglected to tell her about that little gathering; he’d kept it from her on purpose. Anywhere else, that might not qualify as anything more than bullying, but this was the *army*—what Larry did was insubordination. Doug wasn’t much better; he’d kept quiet as well.

Emma was furious with them. Sure, maybe this wasn’t the worst thing they could’ve done, but that was no excuse. While she mulled over what to do with her subordinates, a young man in coveralls ran over to report something to his superior.

“Sorry,” he began as he interrupted them. “Sir, we aren’t getting responses from several drones. The location is...” He pointed it out on his terminal map.

Needing to prioritize his subordinate’s report, the head investigator excused himself from his conversation with Emma. “Sorry, but I’ve got to get back to my work... Wonder if there’s some problem in that area? Maybe we should change up our equipment when we investigate over there.”

Watching the two men go, Emma screeched up at the sky, “What’s *wrong* with this unit?!”

Now that she knew the truth, Emma returned to the hangar with a stern expression.

Molly ran over. She must’ve been waiting for Emma’s return. “Where were you, Emma?”

Sighing, Emma switched gears so she wouldn’t take her frustration out on

Molly. “I went and talked to the investigation team myself.”

Molly was apologetic, although—as a mechanic—the situation had nothing to do with her. “Sorry. I told those two they were out of line. You’re mad, aren’t you?”

“...I’m not mad. I just can’t believe what I’m dealing with,” Emma muttered, heading up the ramp to her Moheive.

“You *are* mad.”

Emma heard Molly’s despondent voice behind her, but she ignored the mechanic, peering into the Moheive’s open hatch. She had mixed feelings about what she saw in the old-fashioned cockpit.

It’s only got bare-minimum functionality... I know comparing it to a Nemain is pointless, but I can’t help it...

Suddenly, Molly stood next to her, manipulating a terminal. “I’ve calibrated it properly, but this was my first time working on something a knight would pilot. If anything’s wrong with it, let me know right away, okay?”

Mobile knights had to be adjusted differently depending on whether the pilot was a knight or a regular soldier—hence Molly’s struggle with fine-tuning Emma’s craft.

“But a Moheive must come with a default calibration for a knight, right?” Emma asked, donning her helmet.

“Still, this was my first time even touching a knight’s Moheive. Didn’t I tell you you’re the first knight that’s been on the Melea?”

“...I guess that does make me a little nervous,” Emma admitted.

She got into the cockpit, although Molly hadn’t instilled her with the utmost confidence.

Before she closed the hatch, Molly poked her head in. “Don’t worry. Everyone at least says I’m a great mechanic.”

“Do they?”

“Oh yeah.” Molly rubbed her nose bashfully. “I always got perfect marks in mechanics at military school.”

Emma resisted the urge to ask about her other subjects. *She probably did better than a defective knight like me.* “Guess I won’t have to worry, then. Okay—I’m heading out.”

“Good luck!”

Molly exited the cockpit. As the Moheive’s hatch snapped shut, its monitor simultaneously booted up, displaying the vicinity.

Emma considered whether to close her pilot suit’s visor. “I guess it’d waste oxygen. This is probably fine...”

A small window popped up on her monitor, displaying a male operator who must’ve been on the ship’s bridge. As always, he spoke with no enthusiasm whatsoever. *“’Bout time to head out. Everyone move to your stations, please. Oh yeah, and since she’ll be deploying, be sure to back up Little Miss Knight.”*

Despite what he’d called Emma, no one objected to his breach of etiquette.

Doug must’ve been friends with the operator. He bantered back, *“It’s hard work looking after her. We’ll get a bonus for this, right?”*

“Ask the guys up top about that.”

Next, Larry piped up—though not to Emma. *“Doug, if we don’t leave soon, Her Highness will get on our case.”*

“Her Highness? Huh? Who’s that?” Emma asked, confused.

“No need for you to know.”

“Hey!”

Before Emma could figure out what he meant, Larry cut communications. She was once again irritated with him when both her subordinates’ Moheives began moving without her permission. They headed out, leaving her behind.

“Ugh, I hate work. Guess I can look forward to drinking after, though.”

“You drink all the time anyway, Doug.”

Fuming as she watched the two mobile knights depart without her, Emma reported, “The Third Platoon is embarking on its escort mission!”

“Uh-huh... Good luck,” came the operator’s halfhearted response.

Chapter 5:

The Space Pirates

THE THIRD PLATOON had been entrusted with the security of the investigation team's construction projects. Thus, Emma's Moheive stood near the team's base, keeping an eye out for danger. Having been told this planet had no significant threats, however, the other Moheives were less than focused. They held their guns in their hands as they stood, but that was all.

In her cockpit, Emma could hear other pilots' chatter.

"Nice place, isn't it?"

"I'm bored."

"Somebody tell a funny story or something."

Those weren't her platoonmates, but another squad's pilots using the Melea's general channel.

They're behaving like they don't realize we're on duty right now. Also...

Her allies' lack of caution bothered Emma, but the cockpit of the Moheive she was piloting aggravated her more. It was cramped, and she could hardly have called it comfortable, but those were the least of its problems. Dozens of people must've piloted it before her; so many smells lingered in the cockpit, just sitting inside it was miserable.

"It smells weird in here..." Emma sobbed as three Moheives from another unit approached her.

One had a visor on its head, indicating it was a commander unit like Emma's. It opened communications with her craft. *"Hey, I heard about you. The defective D-rank knight, right?"*

The monitor displayed a woman with sharp features and slicked-back hair. She'd stripped off the top half of her ground-pilot suit, revealing nothing but a

tank top underneath. And she'd clearly brought alcohol into her mobile knight's cockpit; from the faint flush on her cheeks, must've been drinking on the job.

"We're on duty right now! What are you thinking?!" Emma asked, indignant.

The woman on the monitor was the Fourth Platoon's commander; she belonged to the same company as Emma. However, she just sneered. *"You take your job real seriously, huh? I hear you can barely pilot a mobile knight, though. How about a match with me?"*

She and the two craft accompanying her pointed identical close-range weapons at Emma's Moheive. The three machines surrounded her, their weapons aimed her way.

Their behavior shocked Emma. "Wait a second!"

Intending to admonish them, Emma glanced around for her own subordinates. Since her gaze was linked with her Moheive's head, her monitors pointed at Doug and Larry's mobile knights, but both men seemed utterly indifferent to her plight.

Emma bit her lip, tears welling in her eyes. Doug and Larry evidently felt more camaraderie with her foes than with her.

Guessing as much from Emma's panicked expression, the Fourth Platoon's commander sneered at her yet again. *"Abandoned by your platoon? Weak knights sure have it rough! Man, nothin' pisses me off more than weaklings spouting idealistic crap, like you!"*

The other commander's Moheive closed in on her. Emma jerked her control sticks on pure reflex, her accumulated experience driving her toward the optimal reaction to the situation she suddenly found herself in. Unfortunately, the same thing happened as when she'd piloted the Nemain in her first battle: the Moheive reacted far more slowly than she expected.

"Augh!"

Emma had responded to the attack quickly, trying to move her craft

backward, but the Moheive was even more sluggish than the Nemain had been.

Crap! I'm gonna lose my balance!

Sensing that the Moheive would inevitably fall, Emma checked to ensure she wasn't standing above any investigators. Then, as her craft collapsed to the ground, she tried to minimize damage to the area. A massive machine like a mobile knight was bound to do *some* damage no matter what, though.

The ground shook as a dust cloud rose into the air. There was commotion around her; the Fourth Platoon was momentarily speechless at the sight of her pathetic fall, but quickly recovered enough to laugh uproariously.

"What, did you trip?!"

"Wow! Knights really are something. They make stumbling an art form!"

"All I did was spook her a little! Man, D-rank knights really are defective."

The three Moheives fled the area before they got into trouble with the investigators. From her cockpit, Emma watched them go, grinding her teeth in frustration.

Her Third Platoon subordinates came over and righted her mobile knight. When their craft came into contact, a communication line opened between them, and Emma saw Larry's disgusted face on her monitor.

"Are you seriously this useless?"

"...I'm sorry."

He clicked his tongue. *"Don't apologize. Knights are supposed to be more..."* He trailed off and shook his head, walking away.

"I can't understand how you became a knight, kid," Doug said flatly. *"Is the academy just passing everyone 'cause we've got so few knights right now?"*

"I-I..."

Everyone in the army knew how serious House Banfield's knight shortage was, and she couldn't say anything to dissuade Doug from the idea that training

was now so rushed that it only turned out defective specimens like Emma.

"It's 'cause they never put any damn thought into the decisions they make," Doug continued. *"They may call the new count 'wise,' but he's no different from the ones who came before him."*

He was disparaging the new count—the person Emma idolized—right in front of her, but after the display she'd just put on, nothing she said in Lord Liam's defense would be convincing.

It's not his fault...but I'm such a failure, I can't defend him... I...I disgust myself.

Emma had fallen silent, but Doug was only more icy toward her. *"You're free to work as hard as you like, but don't drag us down with you. We don't want any hassle. I'd rather you didn't expect anything of us, either, because Larry and I lean toward agreeing with the princess from the Fourth Platoon."*

Surprised, Emma realized the Fourth Platoon's captain was the one they'd referred to as "Her Highness" earlier. She was much older than Emma, but that didn't prevent her from being a princess in her subordinates' eyes.

"Princess?" she repeated.

Doug didn't even seem embarrassed. *"Cute, right? She used to be a diligent soldier type herself, you know."*

Yet her spirit had broken, just like those of the rest. He didn't say so outright, but Emma could tell he was implying that.

A line opened between Emma and the Melea's operator once more. *"Jeez. Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman, return to the hangar at once. Way to go, Miss Knight,"* he grumbled at the end of the order, since Emma had created more work for them.

Emma hung her head in the cockpit. *I've already screwed up...*

It was all the more devastating that this had occurred so soon after she'd renewed her determination to succeed.

Emma's cheek was red after the beating she took later from the mobile knight company's commander in the Melea's hangar. A blow from a regular soldier didn't do much damage to a knight like Emma, which must just have made the commander angrier, because he hit her several times. Her heart hurt more than her cheek, though.

"He really went to town on you, huh?" Molly said as Emma brooded. She looked up at the knight's damaged Moheive.

"Sorry..."

"Guess I'll be pulling an all-nighter tonight. In fact, I might not sleep for a while..."

Molly's tone was light, but Emma was in no mood for levity.

"I-I'm really sorry! If I can help with anything, just tell me..."

Molly sighed. "What are you, stupid? I'm just kidding."

"Huh?"

"This baby's constructed really simply. Maintenance is super easy. Anyway, if mobile knights broke just from falling over, you couldn't very well use them in combat, could you?"

Apparently, Molly had been joking to try to cheer Emma up. "Thank goodness," Emma sighed, relieved.

"You won't be able to move it for a bit, though. I disabled its assist functions."

"Huh?"

"I'm gonna recalibrate them. It really is tough to adjust them for a knight, so first of all, I should tune up the whole thing with the assist functions off."

"Oh..."

If Emma had broken the Moheive, she'd have had to write a multipage formal apology. She was relieved she'd been spared that fate, at least. Of course, she'd still have to write one for creating more work for everyone else by falling during

a mission.

Emma looked up at her Moheive. It was constructed simply, but it was still a giant, human-shaped weapon. Simple or not, it was intimidating.

“I’m glad it’s not broken. If it were, I’d feel terrible for it.”

Molly smiled happily. Even more animated than usual, she asked, “Do you like mobile knights, Emma? Same here! The whole reason I became a mechanic was to work on these babies.”

“Oh, really?” Emma was surprised to hear that, but happy too. “What models do you like?” she asked Molly. “My favorite’s the Avi—”

Just as they got into the subject, there was a loud explosion somewhere. The hangar’s hatch was open, and they saw a huge smoke cloud in the distance.

“Wh-what?!”

Emma leaped in front of Molly before Molly even knew what happened. A moment later, she raced up the ramp to board her Moheive.

“I have to get out there!” she shouted to Molly. “Hurry and get to shelter!”

“Sh-shelter?” Molly was still confused.

Emma explained the situation as briefly as she could. “We’re under attack!”

In his Moheive’s cockpit, Warrant Officer Larry Cramer was sweating. “Even space pirates use the fourth generation craft?! Come on!”

His craft’s gun fired a beam, but the enemy was too swift to hit.

The enemies were piloting modified mobile knights commonly known as “Zorks.” That model was popular with space pirates; it was based on the modern, widely used type-four Moheives. Naturally, that meant the Zorks’ specs were far superior to the second-generation Moheive Larry piloted. To make matters worse, the pirates had altered the terrain to get the upper hand.

“*We’ve got the home advantage here!*” Larry heard an enemy pilot jeer. “*You*

really think you can beat us?!"

Their Zorks were modified to specialize in ground combat. They slid over the earth nimbly, so familiar with the terrain that they had Larry and Doug on the run. Doug had managed to finish one off when the pirate's craft went down, but now it was two against three, with the enemies outnumbering them.

"It's not looking good, Larry. They got Her Highness's squad." Despite the odds, Doug hadn't lost his cool.

"Oh yeah?! Well, they're about to get us too!"

The princess was too old for Larry, so he couldn't understand Doug's reverence for her. It annoyed him that Doug had the energy to worry about her, despite their current predicament. Still, it also reassured him enough to talk back to his platoon mate.

Still, the situation was bad. As Larry took fire from an enemy machine gun, his cockpit shook violently.

"This is why I hate these old machines!"

He could spout all the abuse he wanted at his Moheive, but it wouldn't help him. A Zork sped up, reaching him and kicking his Moheive backward. As his craft tumbled to the ground, he heard the enemy's voices through his communications system.

"You're sitting ducks!"

"You really think you can beat us, piloting those ancient Moheives?"

In his surrounded Moheive's cockpit, Larry held his chest. He flashed back to a moment in his past when he'd been similarly surrounded. Back then, there had been knights around him.

The humiliating memory put a bitter taste in his mouth, and he reached for his control sticks. *"I'm not gonna let it end here!"*

He got his Moheive back on its feet, but the hovering Zorks took out bazookas and aimed them at the investigation squad behind Larry and Doug.

“Shit!”

Larry raised his shield to protect the squad, but he wasn't confident his Moheive could withstand a direct hit from those bazookas. He might die—and that fear had overcome him when an allied Moheive crashed into the Zork in front of him with a flying kick.

“Stay away from my platoon maaaaates!”

When he heard that voice, Larry realized who the pilot was. “Is that the commander's craft?!”

The Moheive's kick connected. Its left leg crumbled from the impact, but the Zork it crashed into went flying.

Larry was shocked by what he'd just witnessed. “Wh-who the hell does a *flying kick* in a mobile knight?!”

Seeing its ally destroyed, another Zork aimed its machine gun at the Moheive with the damaged leg. After landing the kick, Emma had activated her thrusters, but she was flying all over the place; now that part of her leg was missing, her balance was off.

Before the Zork could fire the machine gun it had trained on Emma, she shot straight through its weapon with her Moheive's beam rifle. The machine gun's magazine caught fire; the Zork tossed the gun aside, and it exploded.

“Did she aim for that? No,” Larry decided. “It must've been a fluke, right?”

An alarm sounded in his cockpit. He turned to see the Zork Emma had sent flying earlier. Although it had taken so much damage it couldn't hover anymore, it had lifted itself up enough to aim its gun.

“Shit! Hey, that's enough!” Larry yelled to Emma. “Get out of here already!”



Ignoring him, Emma used her thrusters to charge the Zork, her Moheive still moving unsteadily in the air. Fire erupted from the space pirate's bazooka, and a rocket headed straight toward Emma's Moheive.

It's gonna hit! Larry pictured the Moheive taking a direct hit from the rocket and going flying.

However, the rocket—launched almost point blank—sped past Emma instead. Then her mobile knight crashed against the Zork, the two craft breaking into pieces upon impact.

It happened in a split second, but Larry understood what Emma had done immediately. "She dodged the rocket?! At that distance?!" He could hardly believe it. Was something like that even possible?

While Larry was frozen in confusion, Doug sped toward Emma's Moheive. *"Was that the kid?!"*

Neither man could imagine their unreliable commander tackling the enemy like that.

"Why would she do something so crazy?!" Larry gasped.

He and Doug stepped forward to back Emma up. When the remaining pirate realized he was outnumbered, he fled, abandoning his allies.

That just made Doug warier of the enemy. *"That was a good call it made. These guys might be more trouble than we thought."*

Larry disagreed with Doug's evaluation. "He just ran off 'cause he didn't have the advantage anymore. Abandoned his comrades too. All these pirates are heartless."

"Yeah. That's why they're tough."

Larry and Doug approached the wreckage of Emma's Moheive. The impact between the two craft had been so extreme that parts of each machine were scattered in every direction.

“Hey, you okay?!” Larry called.

“S-somehow,” Emma answered.

In his monitor’s communications window, he saw her cockpit; it was in a rough state. The impact had even damaged her craft’s interior, and her monitor was split. Thankfully, Emma wasn’t injured too badly, maybe because she’d insisted on wearing that space-grade pilot suit.

“Thank goodn—wait! First and foremost, what the heck were you thinking?! You could’ve died, pulling a stunt like that! Charging the enemy?! Who does that?!”

Larry was relieved that she was okay, but he didn’t want her to realize that, so he quickly shifted to criticizing her actions.

Emma also seemed to realize she’d done something stupid. She smiled ruefully. “*Sorry. I broke the poor thing.*”

“The ‘poor thing’? Who cares about some crummy old Moheive?” Larry sighed in exasperation.

Doug relayed Colonel Baker’s orders to Larry. “*We’re retreating to space. Larry, pick up the kid and head back to the Melea.*”

Glancing over at the investigation squad, Larry saw them already boarding the carrier. They couldn’t afford to leisurely explore a planet occupied by an enemy. Still, he found the order a bit strange.

“Just to *space*? We’re not going back to the home planet?”

“*Nope. Looks like this mission will be even more trouble than we thought.*”

“Huh?”

Later, in the Melea’s medbay...

“You idiot! How much love do you think I poured into that baby?!” Molly yanked on Emma’s cheeks.

“Fhat huwts... It huwts...”

Emma’s head and arms were bandaged. The ship’s medic had told her to rest, but she wasn’t in pain—aside from her stinging cheeks. Molly knew Emma’s strengthened physique wasn’t easily injured, which was why she was punishing her superior with physical violence.

“How much work do you think it took even to get that thing moving?! I told you it’s hard adjusting them for knights to pilot!” Molly was furious that the Moheive she’d poured so much work into had been destroyed.

“I’m sorry...” Emma apologized when Molly finally freed her.

Molly sighed. “Well, since you came back alive, I guess it’s all good. I didn’t think you could actually tackle the enemy like that with your craft’s assist functions out of commission.”

“Aha ha ha! I’m surprised too.”

Emma had been moving on pure instinct. She hadn’t thought she’d succeed either.

Assist functions were, as their name implied, technology that helped pilots control mobile knights’ movements. They’d become part of a mobile knight’s default operating system during the last few centuries. Thanks to them, pilots became proficient much more quickly. Nowadays, no one even considered operating a mobile knight without assist functions, so Molly had been shocked that Emma’s tackle connected.

“I can’t believe you managed that,” the mechanic emphasized. “You can hardly even pilot the thing normally.”

“Eh heh heh heh...”

“Well, I’m glad you’re back safe, at least. One wrong move, and you could’ve died out there, understand?”

“Y-yes.”

Molly sighed at the way Emma was smiling. “By the way, did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“The Fourth Platoon got completely wiped out.”

“...What?!”

Emma could hardly believe the space pirates had destroyed the squadron who'd mocked her. The Fourth Platoon had been as much alive as she was just a few hours earlier, but they were gone now. That was hard to reconcile.

“Two First Platoon members died too. The Third's pretty much the only squadron intact. Well, besides the squads that weren't deployed.”

Given that Emma's Third Platoon was the only squad still functioning, the First Company had nearly been wiped out.

“I-I see...” She hadn't known the other squads' members long, but it still pricked her heart to know people she was familiar with had been killed.

Molly continued dispassionately, as if she'd gotten used to the idea of people around her dying. “The guys up top are really panicking too—though I'm not sure why.”

“Did something else happen?”

“Well, some allies are coming, I guess... But it's strange. It's like some special forces unit. Everyone's freaking out.”

“Special forces? They aren't just sending a normal unit to deal with this?”

What would special forces want with a deserted planet out here in the boonies? The pair pondered that question for a while, but never arrived at an answer.

Chapter 6:

An Emergency Deployment

ALIAS, A PLANET House Banfield had recently acquired, had turned out to be a space pirate base. After receiving that report, government officials and soldiers on the house's home planet of Hydra ran themselves ragged all day. For her part, former head knight Christiana contacted her subordinate Colonel Claudia Beltran.

Claudia was on a mission; she was leading a fleet of several hundred ships in an attack on a pirate base.

Christiana sat before the monitor of a communication device to converse with Claudia long-distance. "How soon can you head to Alias, Claudia?"

"We're just wrapping up the attack on this base. I can head there as soon as we finish," Claudia replied, dauntless in the face of her commanding officer's new orders.

Christiana contacting Claudia, despite the fact that the latter's fleet was currently in battle, could hardly be called good manners. Yet that was the gravity of the situation.

"There's another base on Alias," she told Claudia.

"Once we're done at this base, we'll—"

"That's not soon enough. We're dispatching a fleet from Hydra as well, but yours is the only fleet that could make it to Alias in time."

"...Is there some reason to be in such a hurry?" Claudia asked, dubious.

Christiana lowered her voice slightly. "There's a weapon-production plant on Alias. I can't believe *that's* what we were really looking for there. To make matters worse, its scale is even greater than we imagined."

"How large is it?"

“At least big enough to manufacture a fleet. And the security force on-site has engaged them, so the enemy is aware of us as well. If they get away, it’ll be a problem.”

“*Wha—?!*” Claudia had kept her cool hearing that there was a weapons plant on Alias, but now she saw why Christiana was so rushed. Weapons plants were their main targets; they were to destroy those operations over any other target. Furthermore, the plant was bigger than they’d expected. If they sent any old force to take it out, they could altogether fail; the pirates could all too easily turn the tables on them.

Christiana ensured Claudia understood the situation as House Banfield saw it, partly to make certain her subordinate was aware of all the facts, and partly to drive home what Claudia’s priorities should be. “House Banfield may only have just acquired Alias, but governing it falls squarely within our responsibilities now. If people learn we let space pirates maintain a base on one of our planets—let alone manufacture weapons—we’ll lose all the trust we worked so hard to accumulate up till now.”

This was a big problem for House Banfield, one that would affect their future as a noble family. Of course, the worst-case scenario Christiana was positing was ridiculous. Considering how recently House Banfield had acquired Alias, no sane person would blame them for the pirates’ presence there. Still, their current situation wasn’t so simple.

“House Berkeley was destroyed several years ago, but plenty of Empire nobles still view House Banfield as an enemy. We can’t show them any weakness.”

Claudia’s eyes darted as she considered what to do. Calculating the manpower she could spare, she told Christiana, “*I’ll send the bare minimum forces ahead.*”

Christiana didn’t think that would be enough. “Then have your advance force rendezvous with the forces already on-site. Cut the enemy’s retreat off, and

focus on gaining control of Alias until the rest of your forces arrive.”

Claudia frowned slightly at that suggestion. *“No, ma’am. The advance force will deal with it alone. We don’t need help from on-site units.”*

Christiana seemed conflicted, but didn’t comment directly on Claudia’s plan. “I’ll leave that decision to you as the commanding officer there. If you can, seize control of the plant, and capture the space pirates.”

“‘Capture,’ ma’am?”

“There’s a good chance they have a backer. I’ve already received Lord Liam’s permission to send special landing forces in a high-speed ship. Rendezvous with them on-site.”

Claudia was surprised to hear that. *“To send Treasure?”* That was the name of the army’s special landing force. *“I’m surprised Lord Liam authorized that.”*

“Just three platoons. He couldn’t spare more than that.”

“That’s plenty. They’ll be the best reinforcements I could ask for.”

Treasure was an elite unit the current Count Banfield had put together. It normally only moved on his direct orders. Treasure fought on the front lines of every battle it participated in. Whether its members were up against an enemy fortress or a battleship, they infiltrated the location and performed their mission without fail.

In that, they were the same as any other landing force, but Treasure handled missions no ordinary unit could. Each and every one of them was incredibly formidable, and their presence always reassured allies. The fact that the count had dispatched this unit proved just how dire the situation was.

“I’m still not fully confident in our forces,” Christiana added. “I want you to work with the on-site security force, Claudia.”

Claudia’s eyes went cold. She’d confirmed the identity of the unit stationed on Alias. *“Some remote security force will be useless to me,”* she told Christiana.

Deciding not to argue, Christiana repeated, “I’ll leave the decision to you. Do

as you see fit.”

The call ended. “You know, this is an opportunity for you too, Claudia,” Christiana murmured.

The mansion House Banfield’s lord maintained on his home planet, Hydra, was on the scale of a city, not just a building.

Its owner, Count Liam Sera Banfield, was confirming the contents of digital documents he’d just received. Glancing over several dozen screens in only an instant, he scoffed. “A parting gift from House Berkeley, eh? It’s more trouble than a simple base, for sure...”

Liam was alone in his spacious office until a large man appeared out of his shadow. The man wore an ominous mask, but his sudden appearance didn’t affect Liam in the slightest.

“Is it done?” Liam calmly asked him.

The large man knelt and bowed his head. “Yes, Master. The matter troubling your butler was a young knight.”

“A knight?”

Something had been bothering Liam’s butler lately, so Liam had sent his operative to look into it, but the investigation’s results let him down somewhat.

Data on a female knight appeared before Liam. He looked it over and narrowed his eyes. “So, he was worried about some girl he knew getting sent to the boonies. He could just have asked me to assign her somewhere safe.”

“I expect he didn’t want to trouble you, Master,” said the large man, doing his best to guess the butler’s feelings. “He’s a stickler for rules as well. I don’t imagine he wanted the girl to receive special treatment just because he knows her.”

“Guess that’s like him. She was sent to Alias, huh? Unlucky girl. But it’d be a pain if she died out there. Call her back and station her in the rear—”

Liam stopped when he noticed the hapless girl's rank—D, the lowest rank a knight could hold. He perused a few documents more closely—specifically, Emma Rodman's records from her time in the knight academy. When he saw the data on her mobile-knight piloting ability, he put a hand to his forehead and threw his head back, laughing.

"How interesting!"

"You've taken an interest in her, Master?" the large man asked. "A girl who only achieved D rank?"

Liam stopped laughing and stood. "We're sending a high-speed ship to Alias, right? Perfect. I want you to send *that* to this girl," he commanded the large man. "Of course, actually being able to handle it will be up to her."

The large man immediately comprehended what Liam meant by "*that*." "Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm dispatching my landing force too. You can send them together."

Liam looked back at Emma's data. The documents projected in the air around him included a picture of her in her formal uniform, chest puffed with anticipation.

"You know, it's an honor for *me* to expect anything of you," he told it. "You'd better work your ass off, Rodman."

A few days after the skirmish on Alias, the Melea was standing by near the planet when a ship approached. It was a high-speed vessel meant to travel quickly above all else, and on board was Claudia.

Confirming the sight of the Melea from the bridge, Claudia's brow furrowed. Seeing her expression, a subordinate asked somewhat awkwardly, "Who'd have thought we'd meet up with the ship where they send the demoted, huh?"

"Despicable, the lot of them," Claudia replied. "They're vermin who have the gall to complain, even as undeserving recipients of Lord Liam's compassion."

“Pretty harsh, ma’am,” her subordinate shrugged. Looking over data on the Melea, he found that a knight was aboard. “Hunh. The Melea has a knight. Wonder what they had to do to get sent out here when we’ve got so few knights to spare.”

He was looking up details on the knight when Claudia glanced over at him. “She’s a knight I deemed defective myself. I never imagined we’d reunite so soon.”

“Oh, one of your students, Commander?”

“Even calling her that is ridiculous.”

“Harsh as always, ma’am.”

Since Claudia insisted on the girl’s incompetence, her subordinate could only shrug and shake his head.

The border region investigation squad had temporarily retreated from Alias. As for the carrier assigned to guard them, Melea, an ominous mood had settled throughout the ship.

The ship’s key personages had gathered in a large, dim room and were meeting around a projected three-dimensional image. The Melea’s mobile knight squads were also present.

Watching from near a wall, Emma observed the colonel who’d just boarded the Melea. *I never thought the instructor would show up here.*

Emma’s former instructor, Claudia Beltran, had arrived to the Melea with her own unit. Yet neither side seemed to think very highly of the other.

An unmotivated Colonel Baker listed his complaints to Claudia. “I was told a fleet would come meet us, but you’ve just got a company of mobile knights and a tiny landing force! If House Banfield wants us to take out a pirate base with just those, they must think awfully highly of us.”

When Colonel Baker disparaged his higher-ups and House Banfield itself, Claudia's subordinates put their hands on their weapons. As outstandingly loyal knights, they couldn't allow anyone to ridicule their liege.

Claudia raised a hand to stop them, but she was clearly just as upset by Baker's comment. "We don't have time to listen to your snide remarks. Let's get this briefing over with already."

The unit Claudia commanded was part of the private army the current count had put together. It was the ideal force in terms of skill, strength, and morale. The Melea, on the other hand, housed misfits lacking in every single one of those categories. Both sides' mutual animosity made this meeting tense.

Next to Emma, Larry leaned against a wall, his hands in his pockets. He glanced at Claudia, then looked over at Emma and snorted. "Real knights are something else. Nothing at all like you."

"It's not like I disagree..."

It was only natural that Emma came off as inferior to Claudia's knights. Every knight in that unit was ranked at least B, and Claudia herself had a special rank—AA—that was above even A. Her unit should never have been sent to a border area like this, which made it clear to Emma how unusual this situation was.

It's strange to send elites just to take out a pirate base, isn't it?

Claudia's unit would have no trouble occupying the enemy base, but their presence seemed like overkill to Emma. It was also strange that their strategy had been chosen so quickly when their information was limited at best.

I'm sure they'll be fine, but I am curious why they're hurrying so much. It's almost like they're nervous. As Claudia explained the operation, Emma felt like her former instructor was concealing something from the Melea's crew.

"That's all," Claudia finished.

Doug, who'd been listening with his arms crossed, stomped forward. "Wait a

minute. You seriously intend to occupy the enemy base with just *us*?”

Doug, a warrant officer, had spoken rudely to Claudia, a colonel. As his superior, Emma hurried to stop him. “Doug, you can’t do that!”

“Keep quiet, kid. Listen, we’re sick of being sent out to die for no reason.”

Claudia’s eyes darted to Emma for an instant before she turned on Doug coldly. “You don’t decide what reason you die for. These are your orders. Shut up and obey them.”

“Hah! You demote us, toss us out here, and then want our help when it’s convenient? Or is this just a chance to get rid of us once and for all?”

“Doug, you’re way out of line!”

Emma was the only one trying to stop Doug. The rest of the crew must’ve felt the way he did; they glared at Claudia and her knights.

Claudia gazed at the Melea’s crew, obvious disdain in her eyes. “It vexes me to no end that I have no choice but to make use of weaklings like you.”

She should’ve punished Doug’s behavior severely, but she just turned and left the room with her subordinates, as if simply uninterested in him.

Colonel Baker sighed and scratched his head. He must’ve been nervous. “That took a few years off my life, Doug.”

“Sorry, sir. But I’m not devoted enough anymore to put my life on the line.”

Colonel Baker smiled. “I feel the same way. But I really wonder if they plan to suppress the base with just these forces.”

Doug seemed to think it was strange too. “Can’t imagine that’ll go well. But they’re probably scrambling to get achievements under their belts out here.”

Listening to their conversation, the crew nodded along in agreement. Emma could hardly bear it. *The Melea’s passengers don’t have any faith in knights.*

She hung her head and clenched her fists. The soldiers aboard the Melea, refusing to take part in the mission... Claudia and her knights, looking down on

them... Emma hated all of it. They should've been working together.

This is so messed up...

Just then, an image was projected into the meeting room, and a bright voice that didn't match the dismal mood at all rang out.

"Emma! We just got an incredible delivery!" It was Molly.

"Huh? Er..." Emma looked up, baffled.

"Just get down here. Everyone's waiting for you," Molly told her, ignoring everyone else in the room.

In one of the Melea's gravity-free corridors, Molly beckoned Emma toward a hangar. "Over here, Emma!"

"W-wait a second," Emma responded. "A delivery? For me?"

"It's amazing! When you see it, you're gonna lose it!" Molly shoved Emma into the hangar excitedly.

What Emma saw as they arrived was a replacement for her lost Moheive. Approaching the mobile knight, she looked up at it from below. The machine shone under the lights of the hangar. It was the same model as the Nemain she'd piloted once before, but a few details were different, such as this unit's backpack.

The machine had a slim silhouette, and it shouldered two rockets, rather than having wing-shaped boosters on its back. On its head were twin eye cameras and a face cover to protect them. The craft's joints were reinforced, making it look more like a prototype than a typical Nemain. In fact, probably only people familiar with Nemains could've identified it as one. That was how strange the unit before Emma was; still, to her, it was unmistakably a state-of-the-art mobile knight.

"It's a Nemain..." she murmured.

“A real one! A real Nemain! Oh, new mobile knights are just the best!” Molly embraced the craft’s leg excitedly.

As Emma stood looking up at the Nemain, dumbfounded, a soldier in a space-grade powered suit approached her. The soldier’s combat suit was heavy and intimidating—something a landing force member would equip—and it was black, which made it even scarier.

The mask of the intimidating suit opened to reveal a woman inside. She had short-cropped hair and sharp eyes, and looked like a hardened veteran, but smiled warmly when she saw Emma.

“Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman? Mind signing for the delivery?”

She held out an electronic document to Emma, who shook her head.

“Er—there must be some kind of mistake! I’m just a D-ranker, I...” Emma stammered.

The special landing force soldier just held out the document once more. “There’s no mistake. Your signature, please.” Looking rather amused by Emma’s reaction, she floated the document through the air toward the girl.

Sure enough, the recipient was listed as “Emma Rodman.” Emma took the document, baffled. “O-okay.” She signed.

The soldier confirmed her signature and nodded, then took a good look at Emma. Emma froze, and the soldier said, “I have a message for you from the sender.”

“From the *sender*?”

Normally, the military decided where mobile knights would be distributed. It was uncommon for an individual to send one somewhere. It might’ve made sense if Emma were a noble, but she was only a commoner. She couldn’t imagine who would have sent her the Nemain.

She thought the soldier might tell her, but apparently, that wasn’t a part of the message. ““Show me you can master it,”” the soldier said.

“Huh? Th-that’s all?”

“Yep, that’s all. I wasn’t instructed to say anything else,” the soldier confirmed, smiling broadly.



Emma timidly asked, “Um, do you know who sent it? I-I should know *that*, shouldn’t I?”

The soldier mulled that over for a moment, then said somewhat teasingly, “As the sender didn’t leave a name, I can’t reveal their identity myself. In any case, the item’s been delivered.”

Just like that, the soldier flew off through the zero-gravity hangar. Emma watched her, a bit spellbound by the graceful way she avoided obstacles, then realized she hadn’t actually heard the sender’s name.

“Huh?! Wait. What am I supposed to do with this?!”

Emma looked up in wonder at the Nemain that, much to her confusion, she’d been sent.

“...I’m supposed to ‘master’ it?”

Chapter 7:

The Jager Squad

NEAR THE PLANET ALIAS, ships gathered one after another. The vessels clustered around the Melea had multiple boosters enabling them to travel at high speed. Those high-speed ships were fragile and poorly suited to battle; they also couldn't carry much. The military only had a few, but they were crucial under circumstances like these.

The high-speed ships would play no part in the coming battle. They were here simply to hand over supplies and pick up the investigation team aboard the Melea, then head back to Hydra.

As Claudia watched them work, her subordinates pestered her.

"It just isn't right! Why should a defective D-ranker get a new model like that?"

"You should be piloting it, Colonel! A special modified unit like that would be worth much more in your hands!"

"The Third Weapons Factory even sent an engineer out with that thing."

Her subordinates were upset that Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman—a D-rank knight deemed worthless in combat—had received a new Nemain model. In this type of situation, they could use whatever help they could get; it was no time to waste such a state-of-the-art mobile knight.

However, Claudia couldn't bring herself to reclaim the new model from Emma. That simply wasn't her place. Her decision as on-site commander would've been to put the new model in a skilled pilot's hands as soon as possible, but the special landing force Treasure had delivered the Nemain to Emma specifically. Only one person Claudia could think of would be able to authorize that, and only the head of House Banfield was free to mobilize Treasure in that manner. Christiana likely didn't even know about the delivery.

It's not my place to interfere.

Claudia gave her complaining subordinates a sharp look and barked, "It's an order from up top. The machine isn't even part of this operation. Don't make this any more trouble than it already is."

Her subordinates fell silent at her icy tone.

They weren't the only ones with questions, though. *Why did he send a mobile knight to her specifically? With a Third Weapons Factory engineer, no less...?*

The pilots aboard the Melea, including Doug and Larry, were gathered in the hangar around the mobile knight Emma had received, officially named the Nemain Experimental Prototype. Staring up at the machine, they weighed in on it.

"So that's a Nemain."

"Doesn't look very strong, given how skinny it is."

"What's the top brass thinking, sending this thing to that defective kid?"

"Maybe she's got friends in high places."

"Are you stupid? Who'd get sent out here if they had friends somewhere?"

"Well, if that's not it, I don't know what it's doing here."

Emma was too preoccupied to worry over what her colleagues said about her. She was sitting in the Nemain Experimental Prototype's cockpit, wearing a custom pilot suit, so the machine could be calibrated.

The prototype's pilot suit was custom-made. It was a high-performance space-grade powered suit, but due to the garment's emphasis on functionality, its appearance left a little to be desired. The suit lacked pointless ornamentation—and revealed a bit too much of Emma's figure. Armored plating and technology covered all the important parts, but the suit was still too revealing for Emma's tastes.

She'd been embarrassed to wear such an outfit, but once calibration started, she stopped caring about having other people's eyes on her.

Helping out were her squad mechanic Molly and a Third Weapons Factory engineer involved in developing the prototype craft. The latter was a beautiful woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. The feature that most stood out about her was her long, pointed ears. She belonged to a species known as "elves."

The elf's long hair was tied back behind her head, and she wore red-framed glasses. She was slender and had an intellectual appearance. She was called Engineering Major Percy Pae. Percy had been in charge of developing the experimental prototype, and she was clearly apologetic as she interacted with Emma. Why? The prototype was unfinished.

"I'll be frank with you," she told Emma. "This craft is a prototype loaded with an experimental nuclear reactor."

"Huh? Oh. Right."

Manipulating the control sticks to perform various calibration tasks, Emma barely seemed to hear what Percy said.

Sighing, Percy went into more detail. "Basically, we shoved experimental technology into a Nemain—including a new nuclear reactor type—to try to create a new special unit."

"Special unit" referred to custom craft for ace pilots. You could classify anything customized to a certain degree as a "special unit," but the term usually referred to one-off units made specifically for individual pilots. This experimental craft would be Emma's.

"The thing ended up a piece of junk too off-balance to even move properly," Percy concluded.

The Nemain units House Banfield had adopted for official use were superior mass-produced craft, but since they were all-purpose, ace pilots tended to consider them lacking in certain areas. Most aces requested more specialized

mobile knights, so the Third Weapons Factory had been trying to develop a Nemain better suited to such pilots. Unfortunately, the prototype they wound up with was *too* specialized, and not even ace pilots could handle it. Its balance was so skewed that they simply couldn't operate it effectively, however dramatically the engineers limited its performance.

"No ace we threw at this thing could pilot it. I hate to say it, but it's defective—its controls are just too sensitive. Not even the assist functions can keep up with them..." Percy was sorry to have to send Emma into battle in an experimental craft like this.

Emma, however, was too engrossed in calibrating the machine to pay her any attention. "I think I'd like the control sticks to be a bit more sensitive... Oh, and the pedals could stand to be less so..."

As Emma made these observations, Molly adjusted the craft. "Subtract weight on the control sticks, add weight on the pedals—anything else?"

"When I shoot in the simulator—"

The two continued calibrating the prototype, ignoring Percy's explanation. Eventually, Percy had enough. "Are you even listening to me?!"

"Huh? Y-yes, I'm listening," Emma stammered. "It's got a really impressive engine, right? I guess that's why it seems too high-powered to me."

Exasperated, Percy put a hand to her forehead. "I'm glad you're concentrating on calibration, but you won't get anything out of this baby."

As the craft's developer herself wrote it off, Emma kept giving everything she had to calibrating the mobile knight. "This is like this... And here..."

Watching her, Percy sighed. She seemed to realize nothing she said would get through to Emma. "Anyway, since assist functions didn't help with this thing, we ended up nixing them entirely. To make matters worse, if you lose control of the craft, there's a danger of it damaging itself. So you also need to keep it reined in to prevent that, although piloting it at all is difficult."

As Percy explained just how dangerous the craft was, Emma reached a good stopping point in the calibration process and removed her helmet. Her forehead was slick with sweat, her damp hair clinging.

“That must be why calibration’s so tricky,” she replied. “Hmm...I wonder if we’ll be ready in time for the operation?”

Their attack on the space pirates’ weapons plant would aim to either suppress or destroy it—and they had to act fast to ensure the enemy didn’t flee.

Percy couldn’t believe how carefree Emma was acting. In the end, she gave up on explaining the machine to her.

Meanwhile, a fight broke out in the pirates’ weapons plant.

“It’s House Banfield! They’ll destroy us if we don’t get out of here right now!”

Naturally, space pirates did business with other space pirates. The ones running the plant were making a fortune manufacturing and selling weaponry to their own kind. But now that House Banfield, which was infamous for showing space pirates no mercy, had attacked, they were preparing to flee as soon as possible. Unfortunately, one person was getting in their way.

Among the rough-and-tumble pirates was a man in a spotless suit who stood out in the crowd around him. His skin was white, almost like he’d plastered it in makeup. He was smiling, but something about his face lacked vitality.

“I’m afraid that won’t do,” he said. “We’ve invested quite a bit of money into this plant ourselves, you know. We can’t destroy it to cover up evidence before receiving a return on that investment.”

The pirates found the thin, wispy man creepy. None knew his real name, although he called himself “River.” He’d been sent to oversee the plant—several times. They’d killed him over and over, but River kept coming back, which was why he scared them.

“Why should we care about your profits?”

One of the pirates in charge pulled out a handgun and shot River through the head. He obviously died instantly, but the pirates around him still stared down at him in fear.

“We’re getting out of here. Ready the ships!” the man in charge ordered them. “The enemy forces haven’t fully organized yet. We should have a good chance to get away.”

“B-Boss!” the man’s lackeys screamed, blanching.

He turned to face the door they pointed to and saw the man he’d just killed standing there. River looked the same and wore the same suit.

This spitting image of the dead River grinned at the pirates. “We can’t have you running away like that. You’ll need to fight to the death, if you don’t mind.”

River’s corpse still lay on the ground, but another River was here, talking to them, as the space pirates had feared. They stared at the feeble-looking man, frozen in terror.

“I suppose this *is* as far as this plant goes, though,” River mused. “So we’ll have House Banfield sustain a significant loss. I suppose that will offset the absence of one plant. Yes, that would do as our profit here.” The creepy man’s lips curled into a smile. “We have *that* here at this plant, after all. I’m sure House Banfield will be absolutely thrilled.”

Claudia had gathered everyone she’d need for the operation in the Melea’s hangar. None of the Melea’s crew were there; she hadn’t counted them as potential backup in the first place. She intended to carry out the operation with her forces alone.

“We’ll have the light carrier descend and attack the enemy base from a low altitude,” Claudia declared.

They were conducting the meeting around a three-dimensional image illustrating their plan of attack. Hearing Claudia’s statement, Treasure’s

commander turned and looked up at three small ships in the image.

“Suppressing an enemy base with just three platoons, eh? This’ll be backbreaking.”

The enemy base was simply too big for their inferior troop numbers. Despite that, not a single member of the landing force looked grave. Their expressions said nothing more than “Another pain of a mission.”

At that reassuring sight, Claudia let a small smile show on her face. “I’m sure you can handle it.”

The commander shrugged, but Claudia knew this mission would be no trouble for Treasure. After all, they were constantly fighting on the front lines with *him*.

“If we failed missions like this, we’d have been killed a hundred times over by now.”

Claudia nodded. “We’ll leave taking control of the base to you. As for the exterior, we’ll handle that.”

As the meeting drew to a close, one of Claudia’s subordinates asked, “Hey, Commander, what should we call our unit? We were scraped together at the last minute, after all. We should come up with a unit name!”

Claudia didn’t particularly care but couldn’t exactly ignore the suggestion, so she considered it for a few seconds. She quickly decided it wasn’t worth putting *that* much thought into it; their impromptu unit would only carry out this one mission.

“Well, let’s see... It’s simple, but how about something like ‘the Hunters’? ‘Jager Squad’ or something.”

Her subordinates seemed to like that name.

“Sounds good! It’s perfect for us!”

“I suppose it is,” Claudia agreed with a bold smile. “Well, we’ll have to live up to our name, and hunt down every last one of those pirates.”

Calibrating the experimental craft was going incredibly slowly, so Emma took a break outside. She was watching Claudia's strategy meeting when Larry walked up.

"'Jager Squad'? Hardly a fitting name for that trash heap."

"Larry?"

Larry stopped near Emma, eyeing the landing force dressed in black combat gear. He didn't seem to like the Jager Squad. "Those kill counts on the landing force's powered suits... They're the Knight Killers."

"Knight Killers?" Emma cocked her head.

"Aren't *you* supposed to be a knight?" Larry scratched his head, irritated. "How do you not know about them? They're the count's personal landing force, Treasure."

"There's no such force!"

"Come on. Everyone knows it's real. The count drags them wherever he wants, and they're always fighting on the front lines. Every single one of them's a weirdo who'll be in the army for life."

"For life?"

There was a symbol on the shoulder of each Treasure soldier's powered suit: a historical helmet, representing the knights who used to wear them. The "X"s by each helmet emblem must've signified how many knights each soldier had killed.

"Just like those of us stationed on the Melea, they'll never get out of the military. They don't know any other way to live. Both situations seem completely pointless to me."

The landing force had trained hard enough to be capable of killing knights—at least, under certain circumstances. They must've been physically enhanced several times to that end. They'd undergone harsh training, and the military had

poured significant funds into each and every one of them. In exchange for enough power to take down a knight, those forces would serve for their entire working lives. They would likely be bound to the military until they reached retirement age.

The soldiers on the Melea were in the same boat. They were also trapped serving the military, since they didn't know any other way to live.

"We're all wasting our lives the same way, but they're elites, and we're a pile of garbage," Larry mused.

Treasure, which consisted of the most elite forces, served at the count's side. Their situation was nothing like that of the soldiers on the Melea. Still, Emma wanted Larry to know that, if he put his nose to the grindstone, he'd surely be rewarded.

"I'm certain that, if we work hard, things can improve for us too."

Larry scoffed. "'Work hard'? Talented people love to say that. But there are things in the world that are impossible, no matter how hard you work... Just like I could never become a knight at my current age, the people aboard the Melea will never be elites like Treasure, however much effort they put in."

Larry turned his back on Emma. She couldn't say anything in response.

"Hey, are you seriously planning to fight in that experimental craft?" he asked her. "Molly told me it was a defective unit that might blow up on you out there."

He must've been worrying about her. He wasn't being nice about it, but he clearly seemed concerned.

"Well, those are my orders."

Larry furrowed his brow. "You're just gonna let them use you as a guinea pig? What do you think your life's worth?"

He had a point. Orders were absolute in the military, but from a humanitarian standpoint, one could argue that they shouldn't always be followed.

Emma didn't intend to change her answer, though. "My life's important to me, sure. But I made a vow when I joined the army."

"A vow?"

"To protect those who lack the strength to fight. If we leave a space pirate weapons factory alone, I'm sure a lot of people will suffer. If I'm told to get in a prototype and fight to prevent that suffering, I will."

"Are you stupid? What do you think you can do in that useless prototype?!" Larry just couldn't accept her thought process.

He left, and Emma muttered to herself, "I'm scared to die. Of course I'm scared to die. But..."

The person she most admired never ran away, whatever odds he faced. Emma clasped her hands and held them over her heart.

I want to be more like him. I swore to become strong, just like he is...

The Melea approached Alias to enter the planet's atmosphere. Inside the cockpit of her custom Nemain, Claudia listened to her subordinate's report.

"Doesn't look like the prototype unit will be ready in time."

"No matter. I don't want to give the enemy any more leeway to prepare. We'll take the base while they're still cooped up inside."

Claudia was almost relieved to hear that the prototype wouldn't be ready to participate in the mission. Closing the line to her subordinate, she muttered to herself—quietly, although no one would hear her anyway.

"Getting caught up in this, despite being stationed way out here... What an unlucky girl. She should just quit serving as a knight already. This is why I can't stand fools."

Claudia looked sad as she called Emma a fool for clinging to knighthood, even after Claudia had declared her unfit for service, giving her cause to quit.

“You can’t serve as knight based on admiration alone...”

She looked down at the amulet she wore around her wrist.

Several decades ago, Claudia had been held captive in a space pirate base on a resource satellite. Her emaciated body was covered only with dirty rags, and she’d spent her days cozying up to the pirates in order to extend her life as long as possible.

Inside the cells where the pirates stowed their captives, a female knight had fallen asleep and never awoken. As Claudia waited to die in her filthy cell, she wondered over and over again how this had happened.

“Damn it...damn it...” She didn’t want to die. She especially didn’t want to die like *this*.

As she thought that, a former subordinate who’d joined the space pirates approached the cells. “Doing well, Former Commander?”

The man now wearing a crude smile had been a rookie knight in her unit. He was useless, but he’d been entrusted to her, so she’d trained him harshly regardless. Although he had no potential, he was her subordinate, so she wanted him to survive as long as he could. Yet...

“Traitor...”

“Hey now, don’t glare at me like that. I brought you a meal!” The man stuck his hands between the bars and scattered food all over the floor. “Why don’t you get down on the ground like an animal and eat it?”

“Argh...” Claudia leaped on the food out of desperation, feeling so pathetic that tears spilled from her eyes. Other prisoners gathered around, beginning to fight over the food.

Claudia’s former subordinate laughed at the sight, holding his stomach. “You’re getting what you deserve for treating me like shit! You gotta be nice to your troops, don’t you think, Former Commander?”

The man had betrayed his unit to the space pirates out of misplaced resentment. Seeing Claudia now, he must've felt satisfied.

From her perspective, she'd only trained her subordinate for the sake of his survival, but he couldn't understand even that. The man before her had sold her out, and because of him, she'd lost most of her troops. Young knights with potential and people she'd relied on for years had perished.

As she choked on tears of frustration, her former subordinate opened his mouth wide and laughed. "Hya ha ha ha! Man, this feels great. Look down on me, and—"

In the next instant, the man's head went flying. Looking outside to see what had happened, Claudia spotted a boy who might just have come of age in a mobile knight pilot suit. His hand held an antique gun.

The boy tossed the gun aside as if he didn't like the feel of it, then looked down at the man whose head he'd just blown off. "Fooling around in an emergency? What an idiot. Now..."

He peered into the cell, no longer interested in Claudia's former subordinate. Next to him, Claudia's information popped up. He glanced over that, as well as the information on the other knights in the cell. Then he looked Claudia in the face.

"You seem talented enough, though."

The boy had only spoken, yet somehow, the cell bars were suddenly severed. Segments of metal bar clanked as they hit the floor. What had just happened? Claudia pushed her exhausted brain to answer that question, but it just couldn't do so.

Entering the cell, the boy held his hand out to Claudia. "I'll always welcome knights I can make use of. Take my hand—I'll be your master from now on."

He was arrogant, but Claudia saw him as a knight in shining armor who'd saved her. His age didn't matter. Before she knew it, she was reaching out to

him.

She took the hand he offered.

Claudia shook her head to get the flashback out of her mind and concentrate on the mission.

I'll prove to him I'm not useless. That's all that matters to me now.

She gripped her control sticks as the Melea shook, entering Alias's atmosphere.

Once the carrier ship broke through, and it was time to begin the mission, she gave her forces a command.

"Jager Squad, move out!"

Chapter 8:

Banfield Demons

AFTER ENTERING the atmosphere, the Melea charged toward the enemy plant at low altitude. Anticipating a counterattack if they dropped from above, they planned to raid the base from near the ground.

Unfortunately, the enemy foresaw that as well. Using hidden satellites and monitoring equipment at ground level, their base quickly picked up on the carrier's approach and deployed interception mechanisms.

Complaints about Claudia's impossible strategy erupted on the Melea's bridge.

"What kind of plan is 'just charge the enemy'?! " Colonel Baker shouted from his seat.

"The enemy plant's prepared to counterattack!" an operator shrieked.

"I'm sure they are! If we dove from straight above them, they'd have riddled us with bullets!" In fact, the pirates would probably have downed them already if they'd attacked the base that way.

Now the operator was practically crying. "There seriously wasn't a better plan?! Like waiting for reinforcements, or...or *something*?!"

Colonel Baker lowered his hat over his eyes as if he didn't even want to look anymore. "Hell if I know! Elites, my ass... These guys are just idiots who don't value their lives!"

There was a whine of feedback on the bridge. Then Claudia's voice ordered, "*Jager Squad, move out!*"

Colonel Baker's eyes bugged. "They're gonna open the hatch and launch mobile knights while we're cruising at this speed?!" Tearing his hat off, he called back to Claudia, "That's suicide! I won't let my troops deploy!"

“We never counted your troops as part of our numbers. All you have to do is get us to the plant.”

Colonel Baker ground his teeth for a moment. “To the end, we’re nothing but obstacles to you, eh?” he muttered lowly, though Claudia probably heard him. Either way, she didn’t respond.

“Open the hatch!” Colonel Baker ordered his forces. “Whatever happens out there has nothin’ to do with us!”

The Melea’s hatch opened, and Nemains poured out one after another. They’d been loaded with optional boosters for operating within a planet’s gravity. Activating these, the mobile knights sped into the air, looking as though they’d been attached to the tips of missiles.

Claudia’s body sank into her cockpit seat. “Not even a Nemain can neutralize this acceleration, eh?”

Up to a point, the pilot in a Nemain’s cockpit didn’t even feel the craft accelerate, but the speed at which they flew now surpassed the model’s capabilities.

They sped past the Melea, heading for the enemy weapons plant. When its automated defenses activated, several turrets emerged from the ground, and the Nemains began firing their rifles. Turrets exploded as the Nemains’ beam weapons hit their marks.

Claudia received report after report from her subordinates.

“Defense system eliminated. It’s no longer a threat to the carrier.”

“Spotted enemy weapons plant!”

“Plant’s defenses are active!”

The weapons plant was ready to use all available firepower to stave off the approaching Jager Squad.

Claudia smirked. “Their defenses won’t be enough to take us down. Purge boosters!”

She disengaged her Nemain’s rear boosters. Her subordinates followed suit, and the boosters alone headed toward the enemy plant. When they triggered its defenses, the plant fired beams that blew up the boosters, scattering chaff that obstructed radar.

For a short time, neither enemy nor ally could utilize their radar systems, but that wasn’t a problem for Claudia or her squad. On the other hand, the enemy defense system’s aim was much worse now.

“Guess we didn’t need to prepare so well.”

Claudia’s Nemain spread its backpack-like wings, accelerating. Flying just as easily in the planet’s atmosphere, the Nemains headed for the plant at an even lower altitude.

The enemy plant’s turrets fired thousands of lasers. The Nemains couldn’t dodge all of them, but their plating stood up to a few hits with no issue. Their exteriors reddened from heat but quickly returned to normal. They had received a special anti-laser treatment, so as long as they didn’t stop and take continuous fire, they’d be fine.

Noticing the enemy change tactics, Claudia told her squad, “Looks like the welcoming committee’s here.”

Deciding that the turrets wouldn’t cut it, the enemy base was launching Zorks—the mobile knights equipped with live ammunition favored by space pirates. The Zorks fired at the Nemains with machine guns and high-caliber rifles. Bullets rained down on the Jager Squad, but they skillfully evaded them and reached the enemy plant.

Claudia’s Nemain launched a kick at an enemy Zork, destroying its head. When the mobile knight fell, she ruthlessly aimed her rifle at its cockpit and finished the pilot off.

“We were ordered to capture those in charge...but you can kill everyone else,” Claudia told her subordinates coldly.

They answered with a rousing “*Yes, ma’am!*” and began attacking the Zorks. Her forces showed the enemy no mercy, shooting down mobile knights and destroying the plant’s turrets left and right.

One pirate boarded a Zork that was supposed to be merchandise. It still had protective film on the seat, but since the pirates hadn’t shipped it yet, they’d pressed it into service to fight the invading enemy.

“Damn it...damn it!”

The still-young man had joined this organization to get ahead in this world. He’d only been a space pirate a few years, and was still just a grunt. One day, he wanted to go independent and pilot his own pirate ship, leading his own subordinates. That was his dream. Right now, however, he was trembling inside a mobile knight’s cockpit.

The plant he’d been assigned to was a vital source of income for the space pirates. That they’d even sent him here was a sign that they acknowledged his potential. Although this appeared to be no more than a factory, it also functioned as a base with several hidden defenses for use in emergencies. Now, black smoke rose from several places inside the base.

The young man in the Zork with a Gatling gun had happened to overhear who was rampaging through their base. As he hurried through passageways between the factory’s facilities, all he could do was pray he didn’t run into the enemy.

“There’s no way I’m bumping into those demons here. I’m going to get ahead in the organization. I’ve still got a future ahead of me.”

He trembled, teeth chattering, and wondered whether he should he just flee. Pushing the urge down, he headed toward the location he’d been ordered to.

Passing another hallway, he saw an allied Zork, its cockpit burned through by a laser blade.

“Eek!”

An enemy craft had noticed him. At the same time, two Zorks with veteran pilots leaped over a building and joined forces with the young man.

“Don’t stop!” one of the veterans growled at him. *“You’ll make an easy target for them!”*

“N-no, sir!”

He raised his Gatling gun, but hesitated to pull the trigger in case he hit an ally.

The enemy Nemain swung its laser blade, and one of his fellow Zorks lost an arm. The other fired its machine gun, but the bullets simply bounced off the enemy’s armor.

The Nemain rammed one ally’s cockpit with a shield, crushing it. The enemy craft was superior to Zorks in offense *and* defense, and the Nemain had neutralized his two allies in little more than a second.

“A—aaaaah!”

Frightened, the young man reflexively pulled the trigger on his control sticks, and the Gatling gun his Zork held spewed flames. Bullets ripped through nearby buildings, but the enemy showed no alarm whatsoever. It was a Nemain, after all. The next-generation mass-produced craft House Banfield used were of an entirely different caliber from the young man’s Zork. The skill of the pilot inside far surpassed his as well.

“I’ll take you all down and be a hero! You Banfield *demons!*” The young man screamed in his cockpit as he cried and wet himself.

The horned Nemain in front of him leaped up and activated its boosters, charging at him. It reached his Zork before he could raise his Gatling gun again. The Nemain’s head grew in size in the Zork’s camera until it blocked everything

else in sight.

“Argh!”

There was a heavy jolt in the cockpit. His Zork must’ve fallen. He moved the control sticks, but the craft didn’t respond.

“Damn it! This thing’s a dud!”

A moment after he wailed that his Zork was defective, he heard a voice disagree with him. The Nemain had his Zork’s arm in its grasp; it crushed the limb, then gripped its laser blade.

“It’s not the fault of the machine, but its pilot’s skills. Now...”

Before the Nemain could plunge its laser blade into his cockpit, the young man wailed, “Wait! I...I’ll surrender! I’ll do whatever you say! I swear!”

He pleaded, not wanting to die, but the voice of the Nemain’s pilot was icy.

“I don’t give a damn about some grunt.”

The last thing the young man saw, after his monitor cut out and his cockpit plunged into darkness, was the bright laser blade crashing in...

Once the base’s turrets were neutralized, one of Claudia’s allies approached her. Their craft was equipped with a pack allowing for electronic warfare.

“Commander, I didn’t detect a self-destruct mechanism.”

“I’m not surprised. This plant is a precious source of income for these pirates. They wouldn’t just blow the whole thing up.”

Self-destruct devices had a certain merit, since they made enemy invasions a little more difficult, but pirates weren’t an organized army. There were plenty of examples of internal conflict leading to someone blowing up a base. On the other hand, if they’d made a self-destruct device too complicated for anyone to use for impetuous sabotage, they might have forgotten how to activate it when an actual enemy attacked. And sometimes, they *wanted* to fight to the death

rather than take the easy way out and simply blow themselves up. Claudia pegged this as an example of the last case.

“All right, bring the landing force in. They’ll take care of suppressing the base.”

“We’ll set up a perimeter.”

Mobile knights weren’t suited to securing a base. They were simply too big. The rest was a job for Treasure.

Three small ships launched from the Melea, landing inside the plant a short time later. Soldiers in powered suits spilled out and rushed into the facility, and firefights broke out inside the buildings. The landing force tore through armed pirates and the base’s automated defenses, penetrating deeper and deeper into the plant.

The operation’s speed put Claudia in a good mood. “Once we capture the people in charge, we’ll be done here.”

She was starting to see the finish line of the job Christiana had entrusted her with when the ally with the electronic warfare pack hurriedly reported, *“Commander, enemies detected in the vicinity of the base!”*

“They had a unit stationed outside?”

Claudia searched for the enemy with her radar, but there was too much noise to locate them. Zooming her camera in as far as possible, she spotted quite a few Zorks in the distance. They surrounded the base, and they appeared to number more than one thousand.

“Where the hell did they come from?!”

She’d calculated the pirates’ potential forces based on the size of the plant, then brought in the minimum amount of House Banfield’s own forces to deal with the enemy numbers. However, the pirates had far more fighting power than she’d assumed.

Suddenly, an unexpected explosion occurred inside the base.

“What just happened?!”

“A pirate ship inside the base blew up. We didn’t cause it!”

“Did they cut off their own retreat...?” So many unexpected things had happened that Claudia made her decision immediately. “Let the landing force deal with the base. We’ll take on the forces outside.”

“B-but ma’am, our ammunition...”

“Just use the damn pirates’ weapons! Determine their access codes—”

Weapons had access codes to keep enemies from using them. By obtaining those codes, they could add to their arsenal.

Then there was another explosion.

“What is it this time?”

“...The ammunition depot just blew up.”

Another explosion, bigger than the previous two, rocked the base. Nearby buildings crumbled under the force of the blast, taking the weapons and ammunition inside with them.

“Did the pirates destroy them so we couldn’t use their weapons?”

Claudia began to suspect that someone was behind the unusual resistance these pirates were putting up. As if to provide evidence of that theory, new turrets emerged from the base, muzzles pointed squarely at Claudia and her forces.

Chapter 9: Sacrificial Pawns

SOMETHING STRANGE was happening on the battlefield. The units that had attacked the enemy plant were somehow on the defensive. They'd destroyed the base's original turrets, but new turrets had appeared and were firing on them. Along with the base's new defenses, Claudia's allies had to contend with a large force of Zorks attacking from the other direction.

"Call the landing force back!"

"We can't! If they escape into the air, they'll just be shot down!"

"This is trouble..."

The Nemains were armed with weapons taken from downed Zorks. Claudia's had a Gatling gun she used to shoot down any Zorks that got close to her.

Inside her cockpit, she confirmed the situation with Treasure's commander.

"Sounds like you've got trouble outside," the commander said. *"We managed to secure several enemy ringleaders here, though."*

"You should withdraw on your own, then. Deliver the captured leaders to Lady Christiana."

"I'd love to, but if we fly our small ships out now, they'll only be shot down. I don't like our chances on land, either."

Enlarging a section of her monitor, Claudia saw that the pirates had self-propelled artillery with optical weapons that could shoot down small ships. It infuriated her how well-prepared they were.

"We'll eliminate the threat," she declared. *"Take the opportunity to break through."*

"Are you serious?"

If the Nemains destroyed the enemy's self-propelled artillery, the landing force's ships could escape. Given the numbers they faced, though, it was unlikely they'd emerge from battle unscathed. Claudia made up her mind as her Gatling gun shredded a Zork trying to get into the base.

"I'm serious. I don't intend to go down here. We'll win as long as we destroy these pirates."

Claudia and her subordinates knew what being taken captive by space pirates meant. If it seemed like that might happen, they'd choose death, taking as many enemies down with them as they could.

Treasure's commander was somewhat astounded, but agreed to Claudia's strategy nonetheless. *"Well, if we survive this and reunite, I'll treat you to some top-shelf booze."*

"Sorry, but I don't drink."

"Ha ha ha! Well, whatever you want, then! I'll send you more sweets than you can—" The call cut off with a short *bzzt*.

Call disconnected, read a message on Claudia's monitor.

"Hey!" she cried, but the commander didn't respond.

A moment later, the middle of the plant split and a hidden hatch opened, revealing a cylindrical hole.

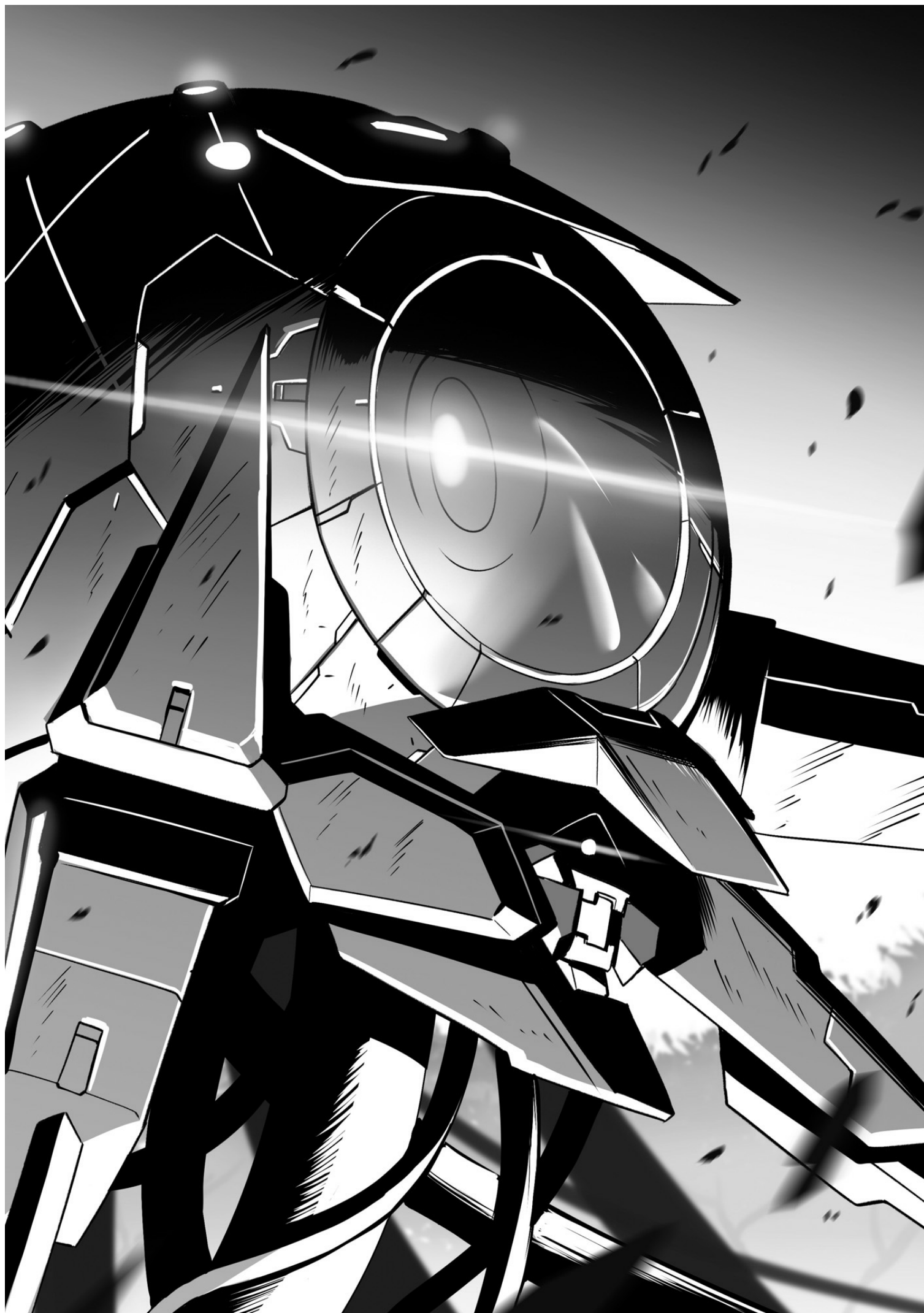
"They've got more up their sleeve?"

Claudia knew the plant extended underground, but the areas down there should only have contained power-supply facilities. For a pirate weapons plant in the middle of nowhere, this place was far too well equipped.

She steeled herself as an enormous weapon arose from the underground shaft. It was round and the size of a small mountain, with eyes all over its armored plating. They were lenses for optical armaments—high-powered ones, at that.

Her electronic-warfare-capable ally scanned the enemy's information.

“Commander, that thing’s connected to a power generator,” they reported, shocked. “Those lenses you see are warship grade!”



That meant the weapon's beams, lasers, and other optical missiles would've been powerful enough for a battleship.

"Why in the world would they have something like that here?" Claudia asked. *Why not just bring a ship?* she thought, but didn't say aloud.

Of course, if that thing *had* been a ship, they could've shot it down. Now, though, they were basically fighting the pirates' base itself. Since this weapon was linked to the base, it had a constant energy supply. It was the perfect weapon for the pirates, under the circumstances—a significantly more troublesome foe than a simple ship.

Her ally continued analyzing the weapon, reporting the bad news. *"It's deploying a field for its optical armaments. Its armor plating is... Well, it looks almost impenetrable, regardless of whether it's a shoddy pirate weapon."*

Outside the base was an army of Zorks. Inside was this huge weapon. The Jager Squad was pincerred between them.

Claudia hung her head. "I was just as incompetent, was I?" she murmured.

"Commander?"

She'd walked right into their trap.

A mocking greeting suddenly rang out. *"Welcome, House Banfield! I hope you find our hospitality satisfactory!"*

The laughing voice seemed to come from inside the huge weapon. As it spoke, the pirates' attacks eased.

Claudia tried to get some information from the speaker. "You the boss here?"

The speaker was kind enough to answer. He must just have been that confident. *"Just an advisor. Please feel free to call me Mr. River."*

"You've cooked up quite the elaborate scheme," Claudia told him, striving not to let frustration color her voice. It was incredibly unusual for a knight of House Banfield to speak to a pirate this way. The family was known never to cut deals

with them—yet the situation was just that dire.

River himself seemed amply aware of that. She heard him clap his hands with joy as he spoke. *“It’s very gratifying to hear that from a group that’s made such a name for itself hunting pirates. It’s just...You went a little too far, you see. No normal army would go to such lengths.”*

“What are you trying to say?”

“Well, House Berkeley—whom you destroyed two years ago—was a favorite customer of ours. You may have felt you were only facing pirates, but you actually made quite a few enemies to boot. That’s why you’ve fallen into this little trap of mine.”

As River told it, by being invariably merciless to pirates, House Banfield unwittingly made enemies of numerous institutions more friendly with such thugs.

Claudia scoffed. “Ha! We killed some idiots touting themselves as pirates, but what’s wrong with that?”

Her defiant attitude seemed to put River off a bit. *“Aren’t you awfully confident, given your situation? That’s fitting for a knight who serves that brat Liam. I think you’ll change your tune soon enough, though. And I think the boy’s reputation will take quite a hit today.”*

“What do you mean?” Claudia, who was recording the conversation, tried to get the man’s objective out of him.

River was chatting on and on, as if he were in a cheerful mood. Sure, he had an overwhelming advantage, but he acted like he was in no danger whatsoever.

What’s with this guy? Something’s off about him... It’s like a certain quality is missing. Her instincts told her River wasn’t a normal person.

“You see, your lord’s so-called elite forces are going to lose to mere border region pirates. Rumors of that will quickly reach the Capital Planet, where everyone will come to understand that the boy wasn’t worth much in the first

place.”

“You did all this just to pull that off?”

“Oh, you don’t seem to understand just how serious this is. That won’t do. What happens here today will cause House Banfield great losses. That’s the profit we’re willing to exchange this plant for.”

This was all just to ruin her lord’s reputation. Hearing that, Claudia felt even more ashamed of her failure.

River’s huge, weapon-like craft shifted slightly, preparing to attack. The Zorks around them resumed their offensive as well.

“All troops... Buckle up!” Claudia called to her allies.

Am I going to lose forces again? I really am unimaginably worthless.

Far from the plant, the Melea prepared to leave the atmosphere.

On the bridge, Colonel Baker adjusted his hat. “Where are they conjuring all those traps from? Are they magicians or something? If they’ve got a weapon like that up their sleeve, these are no normal space pirates.”

An operator hesitantly asked, “Are we really all right to withdraw on our own, sir?”

“You heard what the lady said. She wasn’t counting on us in the first place. Besides, comms are crap right now. The smart thing is to get out of here while we can.”

“Guess we’ll finally get the boot after this, huh?”

“...Yep.” Hopefully, they’ll settle for just my head.

Desertion in the face of the enemy was punishable by firing squad, but Colonel Baker was prepared for that. He planned to take full responsibility himself and claim his crew only moved on his orders.

Sinking deep into his seat, he muttered to himself, “I clung to this army for

centuries, but it all came to a real pathetic end, huh?”

He'd risked his life in the past, but eventually got sick of it all and just let momentum carry him where he was today. Knowing this was the end, Colonel Baker... Well, he wasn't particularly satisfied at all, actually.

What the hell am I doing out here, really?

He thought back to when he'd felt disgusted by his superior officer fleeing combat, abandoning his allies. Now, he was doing the same thing. It all just felt so futile.

As he reflected on his life, he heard the operator's panicked voice, seemingly arguing with someone. “I just told you we're going into space! What...? Calibration's done...? What's that have to do with anything?!”

“Hey, what's the commotion?” Colonel Baker demanded.

The operator glanced back at him, stumped. “Our knight's throwing a fit about deploying. She's finished calibrating her new machine.”

“Isn't it *defective*? What's the girl thinking?”

Colonel Baker had heard about the dud mobile knight the higher-ups sent them. He'd considered it yet another insult, but the girl assigned to pilot it seemed serious about doing so.

Emma's face suddenly appeared before Colonel Baker. “*Oh! Commander! We finished with calibration, so I'm going to sortie!*”

Colonel Baker's eyes bugged in surprise for a moment, but he quickly reined himself in and ordered her to stand down. “It's too late. They're probably all wiped out by now anyway.”

“No, the battle's still ongoing. I already got confirmation from Larry.”

“That damn brat...” Colonel Baker muttered, then reasoned with Emma. “Listen, girl. You've got history with that knight Claudia, don't you?”

On the other side of the monitor, Emma hung her head.

From her reaction, Colonel Baker surmised that their relationship wasn't amiable. "Then you shouldn't feel too bad about leaving her there. I'm the one ordering a retreat. It's not your responsibility, kid. Plus, this way, you won't have to head out in that defective machine. It was pretty lousy of the top brass to send you a defective craft to pilot just because you're a failed knight. None of this is your fault. No need for you to go out there and die."

"I've..."

Sitting in the experimental craft's cockpit, Emma thought of herself each time the colonel said "defective."

"I've...I've been called 'defective,' too."

"Again, this is—"

What was Colonel Baker about to say? Emma couldn't bring herself to care anymore. "I'm a knight, though! And this machine isn't defective—I'll prove it!"

The colonel must've realized she wasn't going to waver. He gave in. "*Yeah? Do what you want, then... We're fleeing.*"

"Thank you, sir." She ended the call.

Molly's head poked through the open hatch. "Are you serious?"

When the mechanic questioned whether she was really going to sortie, Emma gently pushed herself to smile. "It's fine. I feel like I'll do my best in this craft... And the Atalanta's capable of this."

Her monitor displayed the experimental unit's classification. *Custom Nemain: Atalanta*. When she called the mobile knight by name, the twin eyes underneath its mask lit up.

Seeing that Emma was prepping to deploy, Molly left the cockpit. "Well, I won't stop you, then."

"Thanks."

Molly double-checked the Atalanta's armaments. "What are you doing about weapons? I don't think the custom rifle alone will cut it."

All the weapons aboard the Melea were made for Moheive units. Moheives were incredibly versatile, though, so Nemains could also use their weaponry.

"I'd like to take as many with me as I can. As much ammo as possible too." She hoped to bring both to their allies still fighting.

From behind Molly came Percy's voice. "You want to bring your allies weapons, right?"

Molly turned around as Emma looked out the hatch.

Meeting their gazes, Percy turned toward some nearby containers. "Well, I'd like to fire these from the Melea, but I doubt they'd make it. They'd just get shot down."

The six containers were full of weapons. They were outfitted with boosters, but as Percy said, the enemy's automated defenses could still hit the containers if she fired them from here.

"Can you destroy the pirates' automated defenses with the Atalanta?" the elf asked. "That way, I could send our allies these."

Emma nodded. "I'll try."

"Let's get you ready, then." Percy headed off to help prep the Atalanta.

"Any weapons requests?" Molly reminded her. "I'll gather whatever I can."

Emma's gaze traveled to the weapons she'd seen the mechanic working on diligently. "The rifle should be enough in terms of optical weapons, so... something with live ammo? And...I'd like to use one of your treasures, Molly."

Molly beamed as if she'd been waiting to hear that. "Anything in particular?"

"Can I use *that*?"

Molly knew exactly what Emma was referring to, even without the knight naming it specifically. She nodded, an excited gleam in her eyes. "You bet you

can. You know, you've got a good eye, Emma." She ran off to fulfill the request.

Emma shut the Atalanta's hatch, then closed her eyes. After coming this far, she couldn't run anymore. As Molly and Percy prepped weaponry outside, Emma fought her fear of battle alone in her craft.

I'm scared...but I...

Trying to repress her fright, she found herself remembering something nostalgic. It had happened a little after House Banfield brought down the space pirate Goaz's gang.

That day in Emma's youth, she'd been camped out in front of a monitor. She'd downloaded a video, and was watching one scene over and over again.

On the monitor was Count Banfield, who hadn't even come of age yet. He'd gone to take down a vicious pirate gang, participating directly in the battle, and an interviewer was speaking with him one-on-one afterward. Since Count Banfield was a noble and the ruler of the planet, however, the interviewer was clearly trying to ingratiate himself.

"To go take down such dangerous space pirates in person... Why, some of your subjects are calling you a hero of justice for your incredible acts!"

When the interviewer said "hero of justice," the count's brow furrowed.

The interviewer smiled awkwardly. *"Er...my lord?"*

"They've got it all wrong. I just...I just did what I wanted to. I exterminated those pirates because I wanted to."

"Right. That's why people call you a hero—"

"I'm no hero. I just want to have things my way. I decided I wouldn't let those vermin take one step onto my planet, so I went out and got rid of them myself."

"Wasn't that doing what was right?"

"It had nothing to do with right and wrong. I just did what I needed to."

While the interviewer scrambled for a response, their time ran out, and the video ended.

The young Emma had watched the count—Liam—with starry eyes. “So cool!”

In his interview, she truly felt his determination to protect the people he ruled, not letting a single space pirate onto his planet. He “just did what he needed to.” The words touched Emma’s heart.

“I want to be just like Lord Liam!” she exclaimed. “A knight who protects everyone, because it’s just what I want to do!”

The man she most admired had said those words when she was young. Justifications didn’t matter—he simply wanted to have things his way.

What about what I want right now...?

“I’m fighting because I want to take her...the Atalanta...and save my allies.”

Emma closed her eyes, gripping the craft’s control sticks. When her eyes opened again, there was light deep inside them.

“If I abandon my allies, and let these space pirates roam free, I can’t hold my head high and call myself a knight of justice. I’ll be further than ever from the knight I admire. I need to be *more* like him now!”

Emma made up her mind, and with perfect timing, Molly gave her the green light.

“You’re good to go sortie. You better return, Miss Knight of Justice.”

She must’ve heard Emma’s vow earlier. That was a little embarrassing, but Emma quickly collected herself. “Of course I will. I’ll save everyone and come back victorious!”

“I’ll hold you to that. Okay—I’m starting the lift!”

The hangar hatch opened, and the arm holding the Atalanta in place activated, suspending the mobile knight over open space. The Atalanta took

position to sortie.

Emma pressed a foot pedal, and the two boosters on her craft's back ignited. Those boosters weren't optional, but a feature built into the Atalanta.

"Emma Rodman—and the Atalanta—are heading out!"

She pressed the pedal once more, and the lift holding the craft in place released, dropping the Atalanta into the air. The boosters on its back spewed flames, accelerating its movement. Soon enough, the mobile knight was flying through the air.

Inside the cockpit, the force pressed Emma into her seat. "Guh...!" she choked. "Is that all you've got?!"

As the Atalanta launched from the Melea, Percy's voice popped into the cockpit. *"She's really controlling that thing?! Incredible... That's amazing, Sub-Lieutenant Rodman!"*

Emma did her best to smile as she endured the force of the flight.

Chapter 10:

The Atalanta

LARRY HAD WATCHED the Atalanta launch from afar. Now, he walked over to Molly.

“She really headed into battle in that thing,” he said, voice full of disgust. He clearly couldn’t understand Emma’s thinking.

“Aren’t you her platoon mate? You could go with her, you know,” Molly griped.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“You’re just gonna abandon her?”

Larry hung his head and clenched his fists. He was obviously also worried about Emma deep down, but his spirit had broken long ago. Nothing anyone said could encourage him now.

“What can we do?” he objected. “All we’ve got is ancient tech, and the crew doesn’t give a crap about anything. If I went after her, I’d just be in her way. Yep—I’d die a pointless death out there.”

“Well, you might be right about that,” Molly admitted.

She must also have been thinking that they couldn’t be much help. Not when even veterans piloting Nemains were struggling in the battle. The enemy had an overwhelming advantage in numbers; a squad of old Moheives from the Melea wouldn’t even buy time.

“You’re too indulgent with her,” Larry accused.

Molly hung her head. “Well, we’re friends. She listens to what I have to say, and she works really hard too.”

Molly didn’t see the Melea as that bad a place to be stationed. Still, the people around her had run out of steam, and no one cared a bit for the things

Molly liked. She'd never before had a friend she could chat about her hobbies with.

Larry sighed. "When you get out of here, I'm sure you'll make other friends. Her type don't live long anyway." Despite telling Molly to give up on Emma, he also seemed to feel guilty about sending out the knight on her own. "She should have just run away with the rest of us..."

"Larry..."

Doug joined them next. "She really went and did it, eh?"

"You too, Doug?" Molly's cheeks puffed.

Doug looked around the Atalanta-less hangar and heaved a sigh. "What's the point of fighting a battle like this?"

At the pirates' weapons plant, the Jager Squad was still fighting.

Alarms in Claudia's cockpit rang over and over. She glared at the weapon-like craft she saw through her monitor, feeling as if she were facing down a mountain. However hard she attacked the thing, it didn't budge. She was sick of it.

"Damn them for bringing out a monster like that!" she couldn't help snapping to herself.

Her Nemain had lost its left arm. It still had its custom beam whip on its right, but unfortunately, it wasn't able to deal a decisive blow to the pirates' huge craft.

Inside that craft, River had nothing but praise for Claudia and her squad. It sounded as if he was clapping in his cockpit. *"Incredible work! You've taken down three hundred Zorks now. I'm shocked that you also scratched the Big Boar's armor. I got some great footage, and I'll even go home with useful data. I must thank you!"*

Claudia had only managed to scrape the armor of River's craft—the "Big

Boar.” She’d looted whatever physical weapons she could from Zorks she brought down—swords, axes—and hacked at the Big Boar over and over, but the scavenged weapons always broke. The scratches she made on the armor were just that—scratches, and nothing more. She’d aimed for gaps between the plates too, but her blades hadn’t penetrated those.

The Nemain’s power just isn’t equal to it. If we had a few more allies... Weapons that were effective against this thing...

The Big Boar’s lasers took out the legs of the electronic-warfare-equipped unit next to her. It fell to the ground. “Ugh!”

To Claudia, it seemed like her misjudgments were bringing ally after ally down. Each time one of them was beaten, her heart ached. *Where did I go wrong? I...*

If she’d had more forces... If she’d worked with the security troops on-site... If she’d been better prepared...

Having thought that far, she shook her head. Those musings were pointless. If she’d brought more allies, they’d be struggling in their own battle now. The Melea’s security personnel couldn’t have salvaged this battle. And if she’d prepared longer, the enemy would only have fled.

“I just wasn’t good enough to succeed here...” Claudia muttered.

If they’d sent a more talented knight... If Christiana were here... She could surely have neutralized the weapons plant with only the forces Claudia had.

Claudia cursed her own worthlessness. *In the end, I wasn’t fit to serve him.*

The Big Boar’s lenses pointed toward her craft. A second from now, its optical weapons would destroy her Nemain.

“I suppose we should stop fooling around.” River intended to bring the battle to an end.

“Don’t take us lightly,” Claudia retorted, making her mind up to use her last resort. If she could at least detonate her craft up close, and deal some damage

to the enemy...

The moment she decided on that strategy, the electronic warfare craft on the ground next to her opened a line of communication. It had detected a friendly unit.

"A-an ally!" they exclaimed. *"Wait—this isn't possible!"*

The moment Claudia spent wondering whether her subordinate had gone crazy ended up saving her life. When she paused, her own Nemain's radar detected an ally rapidly approaching.

"Does it have boosters?" she muttered. *"No, that's..."*

There shouldn't have been any mobile-knight boosters left on the Melea, yet an allied craft was somehow approaching rapidly. It was moving even faster than the boosters Claudia's own unit used. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

The Big Boar seemed to have noticed as well. Shifting its lenses, it fired optical beams at the approaching craft.

"Oh? I take it one of you is still out there. I don't need any more footage, though, so I don't see a reason to let them reach us."

Several of the Big Boar's lasers curved, speeding toward the other allied craft. Those lasers were more powerful—and far more difficult to deal with—than any of the base's other weapons.

Claudia's comms were so fully jammed that she couldn't tell anything about the approaching craft except that it was an ally. In all other respects, it was unknown. With no detailed data, she couldn't help feeling it was suspicious.

Her subordinates had basically given up on that craft arriving safely.

"There's no way."

"At any rate, what will a single craft do for us at this point?"

They all felt it'd be better if the craft just got away while it still could. Yet,

somehow, it continued approaching the plant without getting shot down.

“What the...?”

By the time Claudia realized the craft was still unharmed, River was panicking. The Big Boar’s sensors must’ve been better than the Nemain’s; he was getting more information on the abnormal craft.

“How? How is it dodging?!” he cried.

The Big Boar fired continuously at the approaching ally, but it just continued toward the plant in an almost-straight line.

When Claudia finally saw which unit it was, her eyes snapped wide open. “The *experimental craft?!’*”

The prototype was now close enough to see. It moved erratically, dodging beams. What was astounding was that it had arrived here without being struck once.

Emma sped her craft toward them...then right *past* the plant without reducing her speed.

“Huh...?” Letting out a stupefied grunt, Claudia watched the Atalanta speed by.

“Aaaaaaaaah! Please, just calm *down!*”

Fighting the Atalanta’s oversensitive controls in the cockpit, Emma sped right past her destination, the enemy weapons plant. She quickly switched direction, but the boosters’ force placed a heavy strain on her body.

As she struggled to control the Atalanta, a giant weapon-like craft continually fired lasers at her. Emma glanced toward it, confirming the lasers’ trajectory before swiftly making several small motions with the control sticks.

“Still, if I have you...” she mumbled.

This was when a normal mobile knight would’ve seemed unresponsive. Yet

the Atalanta's controls—which had been criticized as too sensitive—complemented Emma's reflexes perfectly. The craft moved exactly the way she wanted.

“...I can do this!” Emma breathed. The Atalanta wove between lasers, avoiding every attack. “With you, even I can do this!”

There was none of the usual sluggishness of piloting a mobile knight. She'd felt like she was flying through mud in every craft she'd ever been in, but she didn't have that sensation now. The Atalanta kept up with her reaction time. She was like a duck in water in this supposedly impossible-to-pilot craft. It was still taking her for a bit of a ride, granted—but considering everyone else who'd tried and failed to even pilot the thing, Emma was definitely succeeding.

En route back to the plant, she lowered her speed and looked around the cockpit, confirming that the stationary turrets and self-propelled artillery were still active.

“Five...six... There's a lot of them!”

Giving up on counting, she instead lifted the Atalanta's personal rifle. In order to withstand the power of the unit's experimental nuclear reactor, it was larger than the rifles mass-produced Nemains wielded.

As she flew, Emma pulled her control stick's trigger. The images on her monitor changed rapidly before her eyes, but she tracked them flawlessly, aiming at each enemy she passed. The Atalanta's rifle flashed, and turrets and artillery vehicles exploded one after another.

As Emma's enemies watched her work, she heard their chatter.

“That thing's aiming and shooting while flying around at that speed?!”

“It's destroying our automated defenses so more reinforcements can come!”

“Finish that one off first!”

The Atalanta's performance shocked them as well. Quickly identifying the craft as the foremost threat, they aimed their weapons at her.

“I can’t go down here!” Emma swiftly switched her rifle’s setting.

The custom beam rifle had several modes. It was capable of rapid fire, as well as spreading its beams like buckshot. She switched to the latter setting and sprayed fire in front of her. Several Zorks took hits, buckling at the knees. The rifle’s power surprised even Emma— yet it had maneuverability issues, and she had to admit she was at a bit of a disadvantage, surrounded like this.

“The rifle can’t hit them all... But in that case...!”

Not reducing her speed, she fired at the ground, stirring a dust cloud. Then she switched to hovering just above the surface, securing her rifle at the back of the Atalanta’s waist. With both hands, she pulled out the weapons Molly had given her.

Wielding two submachine guns with drum magazines full of live rounds, the Atalanta spewed fire all around it as it moved. It dodged attacking Zorks and spun, riddling as many enemies as possible with bullets. It hit plenty of them; there were so many Zorks, they had no room to avoid its shots.

“This unit fights like it’s nuts!” one space pirate shouted before his Zork’s head took a hit. At the same time, the Atalanta blew one of its legs off. The Zork lost its balance and collapsed to the ground.

Firing the submachine guns, Emma was thrilled with Molly’s refurbishments. “Amazing, Molly! These weapons are so reliable!”

The firearms Molly had tuned up worked perfectly, which made it clear to Emma that Molly wasn’t just some girl who liked machines. Her skills as a mechanic were truly first-rate.



Emma tossed the submachine guns aside as soon as their magazines were empty. Next, she took out a shotgun. It also utilized live ammunition, and when she fired, she blew both of a Zork's legs clean off.

Zorks pressed in on all sides. Yet Emma knew, if she escaped into the air, that giant craft would just fire optical lasers at her. She scanned her surroundings, watching her enemies' movements.

"This way!" she cried. *I can destroy that Zork's legs, then aim for that one!*

Dodging the axe an enemy brought down on her, she grabbed the hilt of a laser blade on her craft's side skirt.

"I'm not good with these, but...!"

The laser blade materialized, and she slashed through the legs of a nearby Zork. Given the Atalanta's nuclear power source, even the laser blade was comparatively powerful. She sliced through the unit like a hot knife through butter.

The Atalanta was so powerful that Emma could just swing her arm wildly, cutting through every Zork she hit. Still, close combat wasn't her specialty, and she didn't like using a laser blade; she didn't feel she was skilled with it. Under the circumstances, however, she'd decided to use the blade against the rest of her enemies as soon as she was out of bullets.

"If I aim for their arms and legs, I can take them down without killing them!"

Her enemies also noticed that she only aimed for their limbs, and subsequently became less afraid of her.

"All this, and that fool's still trying not to kill us?!" one shouted. *"Well, we'll just kill them, then!"*

Emma glanced at a craft wielding two large axes, then quickly turned toward it. One axe grazed the Atalanta's visor, cracking it. In exchange, however, the Atalanta's laser blade sliced through its arms and legs.

The Zorks littering the ground now made it harder to move around the

surface. Enemies rushed at the Atalanta, climbing over their allies' downed craft to do so. But Emma had already achieved her objective.

"That should be good enough..."

She'd destroyed the base's automated defenses, so she wouldn't need to deal with the Zorks anymore.

"Now, I just need to find the right moment to get back into the sky."

She skimmed over the ground, waiting for a chance to fly upward, when she suddenly got a bad gut feeling and swiftly changed direction. Optical fire began raining down around her.

"It's hitting its own allies?!" she cried.

The ground was strewn with Zorks—those still active, and those she'd downed. But beams rained down indiscriminately, blowing up any craft they happened to hit. Emma had assumed the huge craft would ignore her while she was on the surface, since so many Zorks surrounded her.

"A-aren't those your allies? How can you do this?!" Emma shouted at the craft as its lasers curved quickly toward her. The Atalanta was fast enough to dodge the beams, which just hit the slower Zorks behind her.

Taking a direct hit from a laser, one Zork burst into pieces. Some units' cockpits were struck directly; other units were hit in the legs and collapsed to the ground, disabled.

"Ugh..." Emma grimaced, unable to bear the sight, even though the Zorks were her enemies.

The pilot of the huge craft firing those lasers at her forced a line of communication between them. "*Who the hell are you?!*" he shouted, voice full of panic and rage.

Emma hadn't expected the enemy to ask that. Letting her anger drive her, she shouted back, "I'm...a knight who fights for justice!"

"*H-how dare you...?!*" The enemy pilot must've thought she was mocking him,

calling herself that. *“That looks like a craft from the Third Weapons Factory, but it’s no match for the Big Boar!”*

As he began attacking again, another line opened—this time with an ally.

“Candidate Rodman...!” Claudia must have been flustered; she’d used the name she would’ve addressed Emma by back in training. *“Sub-Lieutenant!”*

“Instructor Claudia?!”

“I’ll be brief. That thing’s connected to the base’s energy supply, so it receives power constantly. Its armor is thick too—mobile knight weapons won’t penetrate it. Optical attacks, in particular, can’t get past the energy field surrounding it.”

Flying the Atalanta into the air, Emma got a good look at the Nemains struggling against the enemy. *I can’t believe the instructor and her forces were cornered like this! I won’t be any help to them... No, that’s not right. With the Atalanta, I can be. I’ll show them!*

Storing its laser blade back in its side skirt, the Atalanta took out a machine gun.

“Live ammunition might do it!” Emma suggested.

She pulled the trigger, launching bullets into the Big Boar. They bounced off its armored plates, but Emma had aimed at the lenses firing the beams. A bullet hit one lens, destroying it.

“Yes!”

But the Big Boar swiftly purged the destroyed lens, and a new lens took its place. Emma kept attacking and destroying the lenses, but each time, they were just replaced with new ones.

“That’s not fair!” she couldn’t help shouting.

The enemy pilot seemed to regain his calm. *“That won’t work. I have endless replacement lenses. Fly around like that all you like; you have no chance of—”* Before he could tell her she’d never win, his demeanor changed. *“The power’s*

running low? It switched to internal power? The generator link was severed —?!”

The Big Boar began to slow down. At the same time, the communications jamming finally abated.

Treasure’s commander suddenly appeared on a section of Claudia’s monitor with a quick status report. *“We took control of the enemy’s power facility.”*

The absent landing force had gone deep underground to seize the plant’s generators, cutting off the Big Boar’s power supply.

Claudia was shocked that they were safe. *“You kept attacking in this situation?”*

The commander smiled confidently. *“We’re used to battlefields like this. But it looks like that monster up top has internal power as well. That’ll only last ten minutes—problem is, once its power runs out, it’ll automatically self-destruct. And the blast will be powerful enough to take out the whole plant and then some.”*

The pirate leader lying at the commander’s feet must’ve given up that info.

“Can you take it down in ten minutes?” asked the commander.

Claudia couldn’t answer the question right away. Instead...

“We’ll do it. We swear we will.”

...Emma responded.

The commander smiled wryly at her assertion. *“Did he anticipate all this? Or was it just one of his whims? It’s truly impossible to tell with him...”*

What did that mean? Neither Emma nor Claudia knew.

Before they could find out, the commander hung up with nothing but a terse *“Best of luck.”*

Underneath the plant, the landing force headed for the surface with captured

pirates in tow.

Next to the commander, the squad member who'd delivered the Atalanta to Emma remarked, "She really got it moving."

"Never imagined a rookie like her could handle it," the commander replied. "I thought the only ones who could get that stupid unit going were our boss, and maybe a handful of geniuses."

Everyone in Treasure knew who "our boss" was.

"That sub-lieutenant might be one hell of a monster in the making," concluded the commander, who couldn't help taking an interest in Emma's future.

The squad member beside the commander agreed. "I'll be able to brag that I dropped off her first mobile knight to her."

"When we were sent to deliver that thing, I questioned the order. But from how it worked out, I guess this was just as the boss planned. Exactly how far ahead can he see, I wonder?"

The landing force proceeded upward carefully until some surviving space pirates jumped out at them. The pirates must've felt confident, since they were armed with weapons on par with those Treasure wielded.

Their female leader aimed a huge rifle at the landing force and pulled the trigger. "They think they can just do whatever they want down here, do they?"

Bullets flew around the landing force, opening holes in the walls and floor nearby.

"You're shooting while I'm over here?!" shouted one captured pirate leader, shocked that his allies were firing on him.

They apparently had little sympathy. "That's what you get for being caught! Kill 'em all, guys!"

Faced with enemies firing wildly on everyone, regardless of affiliation, the special landing force rushed forward. One soldier—the woman who'd delivered

the Atalanta to Emma—drew a knife and darted along the wall. She closed in on the enemy, dodging their bullets, and plunged her blade through a gap in a pirate’s combat suit. Then, pulling the knife out, she shot the head of a pirate aiming a rifle at her. Meanwhile, her comrades took out the others, until just the woman leading them was left. They quickly destroyed her weapon, and the commander aimed a gun at her.

“Are you one of the leaders?”

“Huh? No, I—”

Hearing her response, the commander fired immediately. The pirate fell to the ground, a hole in her head, and stopped moving.

“All right. Let’s keep going.”

The landing force proceeded onward as if nothing had happened. The pirate leaders they’d taken captive trembled at the sight.

“Even House Banfield’s soldiers are a bunch of monsters...”

Chapter 11:

A Prodigy

WATCHING THE BATTLE from the Melea's hangar, Percy confirmed that Emma had destroyed the space pirate base's automated defenses. She decided to send out the weapon containers.

"Tell the commander I want to launch them," she ordered a subordinate.

While the subordinate sought bridge permission to do so, Percy reviewed the Atalanta's battle data. No normal person could've handled the unit, but Emma piloted it like a pro.

"She's talented... No. A prodigy? It's really quite incredible..."

As Percy marveled at the report, Molly came by to see how the battle was going. "How's Emma?"

The Third Weapons Factory's development staff seemed to find Molly's demeanor irritating, but Percy—still concentrating on the data—answered her offhandedly. "She's doing well."

"Thank goodness!" Molly sighed with relief, overjoyed to learn Emma was still alive.

Percy frowned—not because Molly had annoyed her, but because the Atalanta was fighting with live ammunition, not its custom equipment. It wasn't even using equipment meant for Nemains.

"Where in the world did she get *those* weapons? I wish she'd equip things made for that model..." she grumbled.

Molly peeked at the data still coming in. "Oh, I gave her those. She's using them, huh?"

"What did you just say...?" Percy finally looked over at the mechanic.

Molly appeared delighted. “They’re not for Nemains ’cause they’re weapons I was refurbishing. Oh, she’s got my best work too. It’s—”

As Molly boasted, Percy tilted her head back to look at the ceiling. “Why’d you give her things like that?”

The enormous Big Boar looked almost like a small mountain to Emma. Flying around it in her Atalanta, she manipulated her control sticks and foot pedals with small, precise movements. The mobile knight was like a bucking bronco; Emma handled it skillfully, but her control wasn’t perfect.

She made impossibly small motions to dodge the Big Boar’s optical fire, but every so often, a high-powered laser scraped her armor a bit. The Atalanta’s own powerful reactor also placed quite a strain on the craft’s limbs. Even if she continued dodging the enemy’s attacks, she’d likely self-destruct before long.

“I need to take it down before the Atalanta falls apart,” she muttered.

Sweating inside her helmet, she waited for one of the lenses on the Big Boar’s armor to move. Then she swiftly drove forward and rolled, dodging lasers by a hairsbreadth. Her movements indicated that she knew exactly where the Big Boar planned to attack.

The Atalanta was still keeping up with her reaction speed. It was as if she’d been freed of the weight holding her back until now. “With you, I’m sure I can...”

The rifle she had on hand still couldn’t penetrate the Big Boar’s armor, though.

Emma checked her current equipment. “The laser blade’s powerful, but not up to it. I can’t imagine a machine gun or physical blade will do, either. In that case...”

She tossed aside the rifle and machine gun she’d brought, then purged her shield and physical sword as well. Now lighter, the Atalanta moved even more

quickly.

Thinking Emma had thrown all her weapons aside, her allies shouted at her.

“What are you doing?!”

“If you get rid of all your weapons, how are you gonna win?!”

Some of the cries sounded annoyed, but she could tell they were worried too. Emma hadn't just disarmed herself, though. A weapon was hidden in Atalanta's left arm, under the shield. It wasn't found on a standard Nemain; she'd received this ace up her literal sleeve from Molly.

Emma had no time to respond to the voices calling out to her. She released the Atalanta's limiters, and her right hand flipped a simple switch attached to the pilot's seat over and over. A deluge of energy raced through the Atalanta. Parts of the craft groaned with the strain; energy escaped its joints, producing electrical discharge. Its cracked visor crumbled, unable to handle the excess energy, which exposed the two eyes on the machine's face.

“Time to end this!”

Armed with an axe she'd stolen from a pirate, Claudia's Nemain took down an attacking Zork.

Claudia's gaze was fixed on Emma, who was fighting the Big Boar. Flying through the air with electricity sparking from its joints, the Atalanta looked just like...

“A bolt of lightning...” One of her subordinates muttered the words.

Although Claudia agreed, she couldn't understand why Emma had disarmed herself.

“What's she plan to do with no weapons?”

It wouldn't have surprised Claudia if the experimental unit had weapons not even she knew about. What astonished her more than anything was that she'd

been unable to see this talent of Emma's. Not only was the girl now piloting a machine everyone else had simply called "defective," she was drawing out every bit of its potential. The fact that she could control a craft more powerful than a normal mass-produced model—and perhaps even more powerful than a special unit—was proof of the potential within Emma.

"I couldn't recognize it, but *he* could..." Claudia murmured.

Emma was practically a prodigy. Her talent likely wouldn't even register in a standard exam, yet she could utilize the poorly balanced mobile knight as if it were her own body, moving it without assist functions. In this era, assist functions were standard in almost all mobile knights, so it was basically a miracle that this talent of hers had even been discovered. Normally, someone in Emma's position would simply be deemed unfit as a pilot before anyone realized their capabilities. In fact, that was exactly what Claudia had done—written the girl off as defective.



Yet *he'd* seen Emma's potential. On top of that, he'd gone out of his way to send her a machine that brought it out. Claudia felt a mix of frustration and envy that *she* hadn't noticed the girl's talents, and that Emma had caught *his* interest rather than *her*.

Now that the Atalanta was displaying strange new behavior, the space pirates moved to fell it right away.

"Shoot her down!"

The Zorks who'd rushed to the plant's defense fired their machine guns at the Atalanta.

Claudia rammed her own craft into a Zork. When the enemy lost its balance, she brought her axe down. "You've got guts to turn your back on me."

"St-stop!"

She struck the cockpit mercilessly, then tossed the axe aside and grabbed the Zork's machine gun. As her Nemain gripped it, the firearm requested her ID. That was a measure to prevent enemies from using the pirates' weaponry, but Claudia and her knights were a unit of elites. She swiftly hacked the gun, gaining control in an instant.

The machine gun in one hand, she brought down each enemy Zork that came her way. "Don't let a single enemy near the prototype!" she ordered her subordinates.

"No, ma'am!"

The Nemains fought off waves of attacking Zorks to protect the Atalanta.

"Instructor?!" Emma shouted as she saw her allies defending her.

"Just do what you need to!" Claudia was jealous of her former student's talents, and of the fact that *he* expected so much of her. Still, she didn't let that get in the way of her obligations.

"Y-yes, Instructor!"

Claudia smiled wryly at Emma's panicked response. *She's still calling me "instructor" at a time like this... What an idiot.* Pushing her feelings down, she focused on the enemy before her. But she just didn't have enough weaponry. *Damn it! If I had actual Nemain equipment...*

As she continued to attack with weapons stolen from the enemy, one of her subordinates suddenly shouted joyfully, *"Look, Commander! Presents incoming!"*

At that, she looked up and saw containers of weapons. Thanks to the Atalanta taking out the plant's automated defenses, it had been possible to launch the containers from the Melea. They landed with heavy thuds, their hatches opening to reveal the arms inside.

"Is that why she focused on the turrets and mobile artillery?" The Atalanta's strange priorities finally made sense to Claudia.

Tossing aside the weapon in her hand, she picked up the type of beam whip she was accustomed to. Her Nemain had only one arm now, but she was more than capable of destroying the Zorks aiming their rifles at the Atalanta.

"Just shoot at it!" one yelled. *"It may be fast, but it can't dodge all—"*

As one Zork opened fire on the Atalanta, Claudia cracked her beam whip, decapitating it. *"Don't dismiss me, you damn space pirates."*

Swinging its new weapon, her one-armed Nemain took down enemy after enemy. It wasn't just Claudia attacking the Zorks; her allies, newly equipped with Nemain-grade weaponry, did so as well.

"Don't let them shoot down that prototype!"

"Show them your pride!"

"As long as we're armed, we're not losing to pirates like you!"

Her subordinates—who'd been struggling this whole time—began to fight furiously to protect the Atalanta. Claudia did the same. Alarms blared in her cockpit, but she kept right on charging the Zorks in front of her, a bold grin on

her face. Her thrusters had long since run out of propellant; her Nemain couldn't even fly anymore. Still...

"Who exactly do you think is taking down who here?"

She rushed toward the enemy craft. With each swing of her beam whip, several went down at once.

A Zork topped with a horn suddenly approached her. It raised the shield in its left hand, lowered the spear in its right, and charged, aiming to impale her Nemain. Intending to take Claudia down with it, the Zork attacked with no regard for its own safety.

"That's good," Claudia jeered. "You've gotta show at least that much backbone for this to be any fun!"

She cracked her beam whip at the enemy. The beam coiled around the craft, capturing the Zork in its light before slicing it to pieces.

There was an explosion, and the surrounding Zorks recoiled. They must've been terrified to see Claudia's Nemain keep fighting, even as it fell apart.

"Now you lose your nerve? I'll show you just who you've made an enemy of. This is what you deserve for shrugging off House Banfield!"

Though its allies defended it, the Atalanta couldn't stop its momentum when it hit the ground. It slid forward, the electrical discharge from its joints getting stronger and stronger.

An alarm inside the Atalanta's cockpit warned that the craft—particularly its joints—couldn't handle its internal power output.

The blaring alarm was annoying, but Emma couldn't let it distract her. Dodging the rain of lasers shooting down at her, she sped toward the Big Boar. Once she reached point-blank range, the beams hitting her craft only reddened its armor; they didn't pierce it. The Atalanta had specially treated plating as tough as a normal Nemain's, if not tougher, and it could resist optical missiles to

some extent. Still, if it took continual hits, things wouldn't end well.

“Don't take the Atalanta lightly!”

The thought that she'd lose if she retreated now spurred Emma to drive her craft forward. Once she was close enough to touch the Big Boar, she was out of its optical weapons' range. In response, machine guns in the Big Boar's midsection flamed and spewed bullets. Yet the energy discharged from several spots on the Atalanta served as a barrier, skewing the bullets' trajectories away from the craft and wasting them.

Since the Atalanta was touching the Big Boar, a line of communication opened between the craft. Emma's monitor displayed the enemy pilot clearly. He was piloting the Big Boar in a formal suit, for some reason.

His eyes were wide as he laughed. *“What do you think a single mobile knight can do against me? This fight's over. The Big Boar will explode in just a few minutes, taking you all with it.”*

Despite knowing his craft would self-destruct when its internal power ran out, the man was calm. His lack of concern over his own death creeped Emma out.

“How can you laugh about that?”

The Atalanta pressed against the Big Boar as if trying to shove it. The huge craft didn't budge; its mass was much greater than the mobile knight's.

“How are you not scared?!” she demanded of the apparently fearless man. “You'll die too!”

She was afraid to die. Many knights feared losing their lives less than losing their honor, and fought to prove that, but death did scare Emma. Still, she moved forward to fight, knowing there were people behind her she had to protect. Not *here* on this actual battlefield, but she had a duty to safeguard the citizens of House Banfield's domain; she was a knight. Those feelings, and admiration of her lord, had spurred her to where she was now.

But the man before her was just too uncanny. *“I overcame death long ago. I*

am Mr. River. An undying businessman who always comes back from the grave."

His introduction sounded like a joke, which was incredibly jarring in the current situation. That just worsened Emma's fear of him. "Overcame death?"

Did he mean he had some technology that brought him back from the dead, making him immortal? Most intergalactic nations barred the use of such tech. Was he claiming he was in a position to employ that technology? Either way, he couldn't just go into battle and do whatever he liked, could he?

The man claiming to have overcome death disgusted Emma. "Even if you can survive all this yourself, how can you treat the other human lives here so carelessly?!" The pirates should've been River's allies; she couldn't stand his using them like they were disposable.

"Lives? They're just as disposable as anything else. People are nothing but a resource. Since you fight in battle as well, you must understand that."

"You're wrong! We don't consider ourselves *disposable*!"

River rejected her immediate denial. *"I'm not wrong. Your master is a prime example. Nobles think nothing of commoners' lives. They seriously believe humans exist for no reason other than to serve them."*

That enraged Emma. As River disparaged the man she most admired, the blood rushed to her head. She gripped her craft's control sticks, pushing them forward even harder...and the Atalanta's power output gradually increased.

"He's not like that! Don't mock him!"

The sight of the Avid returning triumphantly to Hydra ran through her mind. Space pirates had attacked, and the count himself went to destroy them. He was a wise lord *and* a hero who'd saved countless lives, and Emma couldn't accept what River said about him.

But River insisted on her lord's—on *Liam's*—indifference. *"Count Banfield's no different from all the rest. He takes life lightly on a regular basis. If he truly*

valued it, he wouldn't kill pirates so ruthlessly."

"Ugh..." For the moment, Emma couldn't deny what he said. She pushed the control sticks forward as hard as she possibly could. "Don't...don't you talk about him!"

As if responding to her feelings, the Atalanta discharged even more energy. Its power usage soared, and its back boosters ignited, blowing away the rubble behind her.

The boosters helped the Atalanta push the Big Boar. Emma kept going until the enemy craft tipped, and she was *lifting* it instead.

That was enough to shock River. "*Wh-what are you doing?!*"

The boosters on the Atalanta's back worked even harder, and the Big Boar's massive frame started to leave the ground. There was no way River had expected this; he panicked inside the cockpit as his craft tilted.

Emma glared at the Big Boar, shouting—as much to River as to herself—"I'm going to become...a knight of justice...just like *him!*"

The Atalanta's eyes flashed as it lifted the Big Boar off the ground. With one side raised, the enemy craft lost its balance. Like a flipped turtle, it revealed its belly—a spot no enemy was ever intended to see. That area was armored, like the rest of the Big Boar, but not so heavily that it couldn't be pierced. That said, its anti-optical weapon features still prevented the Atalanta's rifle from penetrating its exterior.

Then there was the Big Boar's internal self-destruct device. Emma could set that off if she destroyed the craft without careful consideration. Checking the information her ally had gathered on the device, she decided the weapon in the Atalanta's left arm would be more effective than an optical armament.

If I just pierce the cockpit, that shouldn't set off the self-destruct device!

The Atalanta's arm weapon could pierce the enemy's belly. While the Big Boar was flipped, the Atalanta's left hand punched its underside. Emma pulled the

trigger on her control stick, and a cylindrical device with a stake inside opened up. Two rods like a crossbow's shot out, crackling with energy the Atalanta supplied. As the device stored power to shoot its pile, excess energy from the Atalanta made the stake-like missile glow with golden light.

“Run it throooooough!”

The pile bunker fired, and the stake's force punctured the Big Boar's armor plating, piercing deep into its underside. The stake shot straight into the craft; once it was inside, it glowed red and blew up.

Inside the Big Boar, River was shocked to see the pile bunker. *“What's an ancient relic like that doing—”*

The split second before the communications line cut out, Emma saw River burst into little more than scraps of meat.

“Ugh!”

As the Atalanta lifted into the air, fire spewed from the belly of the Big Boar, where the explosion had occurred.



Watching it happen, Claudia quickly had the electronic warfare unit confirm the state of the self-destruct device. *"The device! Hurry!"*

"It wasn't activated," the unit assured her. *"I have to admit, I was scared for a second there."*

It seemed Emma had destroyed the Big Boar without setting the device off.

Emma relaxed, thinking everything was over. At that moment, the Atalanta reached its limit, and smoke started to pour from its joints.

"Huh? Wh-what?! I-I'm falling!"

When her craft dropped to the ground, it was Claudia's Nemain that caught it. She gracefully seized the plummeting Atalanta with just one arm. Contact between the two machines opened a communication line, and Claudia's face appeared on Emma's monitor.

"Of course you cause me trouble right at the end," she said with some exasperation, looking exhausted. There was a smile on her face, though.

Emma's eyes widened. She'd never seen Claudia smile. "Instructor!"

"It's 'Colonel.' I'm not your instructor right now."

"Y-yes, ma'am." Emma hung her head, ashamed to receive a warning as everything was ending.

While Emma and Claudia had this exchange, the space pirates' Zorks gathered.

"That bastard's dead now, but we can at least finish you off!"

As the pirates surrounded them, Emma broke into a sweat, but the Atalanta's radar alerted her to an approaching ally. It was a light carrier—the Melea.

"No way! They came?!" Emma was shocked. She'd thought the Melea had retreated.

The light carrier appeared above the plant, and Moheives spilled from it one by one. At that sight, the remaining pirates panicked.

“They still had more forces?!”

Despite spotting the Melea and Moheives, they still seemed to intend to fight. But it wasn't just the Melea that had appeared.

The additional allies her radar picked up shocked Emma yet again. “They’re coming from *space* too?!”

She looked up and saw multiple ships break the atmosphere. It wasn't just two or three; a fleet of hundreds was descending toward the planet. It was the main force Claudia had left behind.

“So, they made it.”

Nemains deployed from the approaching ships, soaring downward to attack the Zorks. A unit with a horn on its head, like the one on Claudia's mobile knight, dropped nearby.

“Sorry for the wait.”

Dozens of Nemains descended around Claudia's, which still held the Atalanta, on guard against approaching threats.

Claudia's face was expressionless as usual as she responded, but there was slight happiness in her voice. *“No. You saved us.”*

The sights around them were gruesome. Winged Nemains chased fleeing Zorks, shooting them down one by one. They destroyed the craft thoroughly, showing no mercy.

When one Zork turned its back to them, a winged Nemain leaped on it, plunging a physical blade into its cockpit. Ace pilots felled Zorks as if competing with each other.

The sight wasn't like anything Emma had seen thus far in battle. Feeling like things were truly over now, she heaved a sigh. As she did, she recalled having witnessed River's last moments. She opened the visor of her helmet and covered her mouth. As she thought back to the sight of an enemy she'd killed herself, and the look on his face just before he died, Emma wound up emptying

her stomach then and there.

Chapter 12:

The Man She Most Admired

SOME MOHEIVES had carried the Atalanta into the Melea's hangar. In front of the mobile knight, Molly scratched her head.

"Can this be repaired?" Its left arm was particularly damaged; she judged it would have to be replaced instead. "The arm's a write-off... Man, I didn't think she'd completely destroy a special unit like this in just one battle."

Percy and the Third Weapons Factory engineers were doing a post-battle check on the craft. They cleaned the cockpit quickly, then looked over Emma's piloting data with incredulous expressions.

"I can't believe this..." Percy uttered.

Her words captured the engineers' collective feelings. They brought out device after device, connecting them to the Atalanta and collecting data merrily. A single battle had wrecked the unit, but they were impressed that Emma had tamed it alone rather than simply crashing and burning.

"Sub-Lieutenant Rodman's skills are the real deal."

Molly judged that there was no work for her to do in the hangar. Sighing at the engineers' excitement, she left and found Doug.

"Huh? Shouldn't you be working, Doug?"

"I'm all done... I feel like crap, though."

The higher-ups had decided they didn't need captives besides the space pirate leaders. What had come next was one-sided slaughter in which surrender wasn't an option. House Banfield showed space pirates no mercy, and watching that firsthand had left Doug rather pale.

Claudia's squad was handling the cleanup, so the Melea's crew had returned to its mother ship.

Molly was also aware of what was happening outside. Her expression clouded slightly, and she looked up at the Atalanta. “Wonder how Emma’s doing.”

Doug glanced down, scratching his head. “Probably not great.”

A freshly showered Emma, dressed in her military uniform, arrived on a ship moored to the Melea. Her usually bright eyes were faintly clouded, and there were bags under them. She was pale and had a lump in her throat.

I feel sick...

Emma had vomited in her mobile knight’s cockpit, but not completely from turbulence. That was one reason she felt so ill, but the primary cause lay elsewhere.

Some of this ship’s crew passed the rather wobbly Emma.

“Is that that sub-lieutenant I keep hearing about? She’s pretty cute!”

“I heard someone call her ‘Lightning Bolt.’”

“Dang. That’s a cool nickname.”

The pair passed, laughing.

Emma ignored their conversation, heading for her former instructor Claudia’s quarters. *What did she call me here for? Will I get in trouble for wrecking that machine?*

Creating the prototype Atalanta had cost much more than a standard Nemain, so Emma could hardly complain if she was scolded for destroying it.

Staggering to her destination, Emma pushed the button on the side of the door. Her fingerprint and retina were scanned, and a section of the door turned into a monitor displaying Claudia, who was inside the room.

“Colonel Beltran, Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman reporting.”

“...Enter.”

Once Claudia granted Emma permission to come in, the door opened automatically. Heading inside with a “Pardon me,” Emma found the room’s gravity was different. Claudia had been training, so she’d increased it.

Emma was amazed by the functionality of the colonel’s personal quarters. *I guess you can get expensive training equipment for your room if you’re a colonel. This gravity’s a bit rough, though...*

Since Emma already wasn’t feeling well, the environment was difficult to bear.

Noticing the sub-lieutenant’s condition, Claudia returned the gravity to normal. She wore sportswear—a tank top and bike shorts—and her long hair was in a ponytail. She’d evidently been pushing herself hard before Emma arrived; she was out of breath and drenched in sweat.

We only just got back, and she’s already training?

Claudia must’ve left the cleanup to her subordinates, returned to her quarters, and started working out immediately.

“You’re training this soon after the operation, Colonel?”

“...I admit it,” said Claudia. “My troops are constantly on my case to rest.”

“Wouldn’t that be better for you?” Emma couldn’t believe Claudia was exercising when her subordinates had urged her not to.

“If training was enough to do me in, I’d have to retire.” Claudia sat on the bench of a training machine and looked at Emma.

Emma wasn’t sure what the colonel expected of her. “Er...”

“I wanted to talk with you, Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman.”

“Huh?”

Claudia told Emma to sit. Once they faced one another, she brought up the battle earlier that day—Emma’s first real battle. “My evaluation of you was wrong. I’ll revise it and apologize... I’m sorry.”

At Claudia's guilty look, Emma hurriedly shook her head. "N-no! Um...I really am a failure as a knight. I mean, I destroyed the Atalanta..."

Claudia didn't blame Emma for wrecking the prototype. "In that situation, there was nothing you could've done. No need to be humble. You're a fantastic example of a House Banfield knight. You piloted that craft as if it were your own arms and legs, and killed the battle's single greatest threat."

At the word "killed," Emma paled again. The realization that she'd slaughtered her enemy was why she'd thrown up in her cockpit.

Seeing the way Emma trembled, Claudia changed the subject. "You told me you wanted to be a knight of justice like Lord Liam, didn't you?"

"...Yes."

Back then, Claudia had slugged Emma in response, but she was calm now. "No matter what you want to become, I won't stop you, as long as it doesn't harm House Banfield. But you can't keep naively calling Lord Liam a 'just' hero. You need to know the truth."

Hearing that, Emma found herself remembering what River had said to her. He'd insisted that Liam was like other nobles and didn't value life.

Claudia began telling Emma about Liam. "Since I started serving House Banfield, I've fought at the count's side several times. He's never once claimed to be on the side of justice. In fact, he insists on the opposite."

"Huh?"

"He's called himself a villain more than once."

Emma couldn't believe Liam called himself that when his own people revered him as a wise ruler. "There's no way. I mean...!"

"It's true."

Unable to accept that her idol might be evil, Emma tried to argue. Claudia stopped her, telling Emma to let her finish.

“He first killed a person at age ten. That’s in the public record—he cut down a corrupt official.”

“I-I heard that, but I thought it was just a rumor.”

Although there had been gossip about Liam assassinating a corrupt bureaucrat, people generally assumed he’d had a subordinate do it. The count had gone on to purge his domain of corruption, so people just assumed the rumor stemmed from his thoroughness.

“It’s the truth. He did so when he was just a child. What do you make of that?”

Emma mulled over what she knew about Liam. “I guess he couldn’t accept the existence of corrupt officials.”

“I envy your simplicity,” Claudia said with a small smile.

Emma was momentarily shocked, thinking the colonel was mocking her.

Claudia moved on, speaking of House Banfield’s military. “I got involved with expanding the house’s private army partway through the process, and I suggested discharging every member of the old military—for instance, those now crewing the Melea. I thought they were unnecessary to House Banfield.”

As Claudia described her honest assessment of the current crew members, Emma hung her head. But then Claudia told her why the old soldiers had been allowed to stay.

“Everyone was ready to discharge all the old army’s forces, but Lord Liam showed compassion to a subset of decent soldiers.”

“Huh?”

“The members of the platoon you were assigned to were shown mercy. He’s simply too kind.”

From the perspective of someone like Emma—who’d served aboard the Melea, at least briefly—Claudia’s evaluation seemed overly hardhearted.

“There’s a reason their spirits are broken...” she objected.

“I know. People shouldering huge responsibilities suddenly had all their power stripped, and were sent to the middle of nowhere. No wonder they have complaints.”

“You understood that?”

“Of course. To the old army’s forces, it was a demotion—an insult. But Lord Liam and Lady Christiana intentionally sent those forces to a border area, where they’d likely be safer. To the people on top, it was compassion.”

When Liam took over House Banfield and completely replaced the core of his private army in a few decades, he knew the old army’s forces would think little of the decision. Claudia couldn’t accept his choice to retain those older forces; even now, she felt they should’ve been discharged.

“I couldn’t forgive them for not understanding that,” she added.

“Why? They worked hard—”

“Incompetents who threw a fit when they were sent away, while a child had dirtied his hands with blood?” Claudia had shed tears when she heard about Liam’s childhood. “You call him ‘just,’ but he’s never once thought of himself that sanctimoniously. Did you know that, when he was five, his parents forced their peerage and territory onto him and abandoned him on Hydra?”

Emma knew Liam had taken the territory over at age five, of course, but she hadn’t put much thought into that fact. People had treated him as a wise ruler since his early childhood. Many simply assumed he’d received the position because he showed aptitude early.

“Back then, Hydra was in terrible shape. The military was useless, and the government engaged in bribery and embezzlement as if those were givens. Lord Liam could only rely on the people closest to him... Can you imagine how much he may have suffered?”

Emma could say nothing. She’d never thought about him from this perspective. In the same situation, could she have achieved what he did?

Claudia explained another reason she disliked the Melea's crew. "Plenty of people attempted to kill Lord Liam while he reorganized the army. Some older forces even tried to stage a coup."

"What?!" Emma was shocked. She'd never heard that.

"They were idiots who prioritized their own profit over the citizenry's happiness," Claudia went on. "The people serving on the Melea aren't as bad. Still, to us, they're little more than sulking children. Have *you* ever thought about what it means for a ten-year-old to kill someone with their own hands?"

Emma had just killed *her* first opponent. From that experience, she understood the event they were discussing for the first time. "Ugh..." She couldn't produce any words to describe what she felt. She keenly recognized that she'd never truly seen the person she'd always admired.

"He calls himself 'evil' because he's willing to be a villain if it means his domain will prosper, and he can protect his citizenry. The old army forced a ten-year-old to reach that decision, and now they whine that they were abandoned. It's like a joke, isn't it? Lord Liam's compassion allowed them to remain soldiers, but they feel he dismissed them."

Emma still couldn't say anything. Claudia covered her face with her hands, trying to rein in her heightened emotions. Emma saw the moisture in her eyes even between her fingers.

"I don't think he's wrong," the colonel continued. "But he's never once claimed to be 'just'... If he's going to be your role model, you should at least understand his stance."

Hanging her head, Emma murmured a faint, "Yes."

Claudia stood. She laid her hand on Emma's shoulder. "If not for you, I and all my forces would be dead. I won't tell you not to dwell on this, but...just remember you *saved* lives too."

"...Yes, ma'am."

Claudia didn't criticize Emma for shedding tears. "We've been ordered to return to Hydra," she told the girl gently, "so we'll both be heading to the home planet for now. While we're there, I'll make sure to correct your evaluation. Not seeing your potential was my mistake. If there's somewhere you'd like to be stationed, let me know. That's all."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Don't worry about it... I really am sorry, Sub-Lieutenant Rodman."

As Claudia apologized, Emma was shocked to see the smile on her face. "Instructor...I mean, Colonel...you smile too, huh?"

"What do you think I am? I smile, and I cry... I just don't show people under me."

When Claudia revealed that she only wore her emotionless mask in front of subordinates, Emma realized the woman didn't see her as one. Not in a bad way, of course. Rather, that meant Claudia had shifted from viewing Emma as an incompetent knight candidate to a fellow knight just like her.

That at last let Emma resolve some of the feelings plaguing her. *I kind of feel like I've finally really graduated now.*

Their conversation over, Emma made to leave Claudia's room, but spotted a plush doll next to the bed in the corner. "Huh?"

Claudia must've forgotten to hide the doll when she let Emma in. She strode to the girl, face expressionless but red up to her ears. "You saw nothing. Understood?"

"Huh? Um..."

"You saw *nothing*. Isn't that right?"

Given Claudia's usual bearing, it was impossible to imagine her sleeping with a doll. But the toy was actually familiar to Emma. "Uh...that's a Little Liam, isn't it?"

"Little Liams" were plush caricatures of Count Banfield. "Little Liam" was the

toy's official name, so calling the doll that wasn't seen as disrespectful.



“Th...that’s right,” Claudia confirmed Emma’s suspicions, averting her gaze.

“I have one too!” Emma pulled out her terminal to show Claudia a picture.

The colonel folded her arms. She seemed to think Emma couldn’t possibly own the same doll. “Don’t be ridiculous. They’re not available to the public. This rare find is only sold at a secret shop in House Banfield’s mansion. Lord Liam is very particular about products that depict him, and he hardly ever permits things like this to be manufactured. There aren’t many of these, since only the mansion shop is allowed to—”

“Oh, here it is!” Emma showed Claudia the picture.

Staring down at it intently, Claudia opened her eyes wide, trembling. She was shocked to see her very doll in the picture: a caricature of Liam with a devious expression. Emma’s Little Liam was even signed in gold. “Where did you get that?!”

Oblivious to how strangely the other woman was acting, Emma told her, “I received it from an older gentleman I know. I’m not sure who wrote on it—I guess someone just scribbled that. It really bums me out that I can’t get the writing off...” Ignorant of who the autograph belonged to, Emma smiled and scratched her head awkwardly.

Claudia grabbed her shoulders with considerable strength.

“Ow! That hurts, Colonel!”

“Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman. You are truly blessed. Let me give you some advice: do not remove that signature. I guarantee you’ll regret it if you do.”

“Huh? Oh, okay...”

“That is all.”

As Claudia hung her head, Emma gave her a curious look, and their conversation came to an end.

Epilogue

IN THE MELEA'S HANGER, an arm secured the broken Atalanta. The mobile knight's limbs had been removed, so it was just a head and torso.

Returning from Claudia's ship, Emma looked up at the battered unit. There were tears in her eyes at the sight.

"Sorry I broke you. But thank you, really. With you, I realized I could fight after all."

She'd thought she was a lousy knight who couldn't even pilot such craft, but thanks to the Atalanta, she'd put up an impressive fight.

Still, she was worried her performance in the special unit wouldn't be very highly evaluated. She'd surely lose points for only being capable of piloting a special unit. Nonetheless, Emma wanted to thank the Atalanta for demonstrating that her knighthood was justified.

She smiled wryly, hanging her head. "If only I could still fight without you... Since you're all beaten up, I doubt I'll battle further."

She'd completely wrecked the prototype in their first real fight. Even if it was repaired, she couldn't say she wouldn't break it again in the next fight. If she destroyed the Atalanta in every battle, House Banfield and the Third Weapons Factory would surely decide against investing any more into it—Emma knew that. It would be pointless to keep an expensive custom craft in service for her alone. Although she'd performed well in the battle, it would make more sense to put together another team of mass-produced Nemains. In fact, she'd heard that manufacturing the Atalanta had cost the same as equipping an entire Nemain unit. Factoring in maintenance and repair costs, the Atalanta was a far bigger financial burden.

In front of the Atalanta, Emma murmured, "I wish I could pilot you forever. If I could, I'd actually be useful..."

In the Atalanta, even Emma was able to pull her weight, despite being a defective knight. She couldn't help brooding about that, although she knew it was pointless.

As she wallowed on her own, she heard the clack of footsteps approaching. Looking up, she saw a smiling Percy.

The elf must've heard Emma's murmuring. "I'm thrilled that you're so fond of her."

Emma blushed, but saluted Percy, since she was an engineering major. That rank meant the elf was treated like other majors within the Algrand Empire. Emma belonged to House Banfield's private army, so technically, neither of them held seniority. Still, one was a major in the Imperial military, and one a rookie sub-lieutenant in a noble's private army. The former was generally considered superior to the latter, so talking to Percy made Emma a bit anxious.

"I apologize for the embarrassing sight I must've made, *talking* to the Atalanta."

"As the craft's developer, I'm pleased to see that," Percy assured her. She stood next to Emma and crossed her arms, looking up at the Atalanta. "I suppose our next task is devising a craft that can actually withstand that new reactor."

From Percy's musings, it seemed the design's development would at least continue. Emma would likely struggle to get involved at all, though. She wasn't the unit's official test pilot, so there was no guarantee she could use it again.

"Is she going back to the Third Weapons Factory with you?"

"If we want to repair her, she'll have to," replied Percy, who did seem to appreciate the fondness Emma had developed for the Atalanta. "We've got new assignments to work on with her, anyway. Once we're back, we'll have to return to the drawing board on some things."

Knowing the Atalanta's development would continue, Emma looked up at the

mobile knight happily. “I’m glad to hear that. If it ended for her here, I’d be a bit... No, I’d be *really* upset.”

At this point, Emma had only a faint hope that the Atalanta’s continued development would allow her to use a mass-produced version in future, although the mobile knight was the first she’d been able to pilot the way she wanted to.

When Percy continued their exchange, it was in a direction Emma didn’t expect. The elf held out her hand to Emma, who gathered that Percy was asking for a handshake. She grasped it, and Percy squeezed back firmly.

“I’m grateful, Sub-Lieutenant Rodman. Our development plans can continue thanks to you.”

“Happy to hear it.”

“Well, would you pilot the next version of the Atalanta, then?”

At that, Emma was speechless. “Huh...?”

Both Percy’s hands gripped Emma’s; the gesture said she wasn’t letting the knight get away. “You’re the only pilot for her—for the Atalanta—so we want you to keep helping with her tests. Our headquarters will make an official request to House Banfield.”

One would normally turn down a request to test-pilot a defective machine practically bound to self-destruct. Virtually no one would voluntarily use such a craft.

Emma’s eyes, however, twinkled with enthusiasm. “I’d love to, i-if you’re all right with me!” After giving that answer, she realized that she was a knight—a soldier—and couldn’t do anything without her commanding officers’ approval. “Oh—but I won’t be able, unless House Banfield officially orders me to.”

Percy shook Emma’s hand up and down regardless. “You’ll do it? That’s what you said, right? We’ll definitely get permission, then—so don’t you run away, okay?”

Realizing how delighted Percy seemed, Emma thought, *I don't suppose a couple pilots fled on them, did they?*

Heading into space with its guard ships, the Melea met up with the forces under Claudia's command. Together, the two groups made an amusing image—one a fleet of state-of-the-art ships, the other the ragtag carrier of ancient tech patrolling the Empire's border areas.

Claudia's fleet included numerous powerful, newly built ships. One—a transport vessel from the Third Weapons Factory carrying the totaled Atalanta—pulled away from the bunch, heading back to its headquarters.

Emma watched the ship go from the Melea's observation deck alongside the Third Platoon's other members.

Looking at the elite vessels around them, the sardonic Larry remarked, "A whole fleet of brand-new, cutting-edge ships. House Banfield's sure loaded. Wonder just how much money they make."

On an intergalactic scale, national budgets could reach truly astronomical numbers. Even a single noble household within the Empire, like House Banfield, likely had a budget Emma and her platoon mates couldn't imagine.

Seated on a sofa, Doug grumbled about where that money went. "Wish they'd share some with us. Then the canteen would get more stuff, and life on this ship might be a little more livable."

The "canteen" was a store aboard the ship that sold all sorts of things. It stocked food and drink, of course, but also clothing and daily necessities. The Melea's had an adequate selection, but was limited compared to other ships' canteens.

Molly sighed, asking Doug, "All you care about is drinking anyway, right?"

"But the selection of drinks and snacks here hasn't changed in decades. I'm not just sick of them—I can hardly stand to even *look* at them at this point."

Larry proposed an obvious solution. “Why not just stock up anytime you’re in port?”

“I try, but things just seem to disappear right away. It’s so mysterious.”

Doug’s sunny smile exasperated Larry and Molly.

“Try and learn some restraint.”

“I think you should find a healthier hobby.”

The older man waved off their admonishments. “I’m sick of lectures too. Besides, booze is a war buddy. It’s a partner who’ll be with you through all your life’s stormy seas. You guys should learn to enjoy some every once in a while too.”

Neither of the young people understood Doug’s way of thinking. They exchanged glances and shook their heads.

Listening to the close comrades’ relatively amiable conversation, Emma was a bit envious. *I can’t really butt in on this.* Unable to join their chat, she merely watched from the observation deck as the transport ship sailed away with the Atalanta on board.

In her heart, she spoke to the mobile knight. *Let’s meet again, Atalanta.*

Claudia’s fleet returned to the planet Hydra. The squad put together for the mission had disbanded; its members resupplied, vacationed, underwent maintenance, and received new orders.

Claudia, however, still had important work to do as the former Jager Squad’s commander. Arriving in Christiana’s office, she reported the full sequence of events to her superior and submitted an electronic document.

Reviewing the document, Christiana let out a quiet sigh and smiled. “You’re aware that even elites spend several years ranked C upon first obtaining knighthood, and are only evaluated for promotion after that?”

The document Claudia had turned in was a proposal that Emma be promoted from D rank. Putting her own name down as Emma's reference, she'd requested that Christiana bump the rookie's rank up and reassign her.

If that were all the proposal said, it'd be fine, but Claudia proposed promoting Emma to *B* rank.

That was one rank above average for a knight. Many veterans and key figures held that rank. House Banfield's own policies required knights to spend several years ranked C before promotion, regardless of elite skills. There'd been no exceptions to that rule. It was in place because House Banfield believed a knight's true worth didn't become clear until they participated in multiple battles. Only when a knight proved they could survive battle were they ever promoted to B rank.

Having fought two battles herself, Emma technically met that criterion; still, a promotion so soon was unprecedented.

"I'm aware. But after reevaluating Sub-Lieutenant Rodman's abilities, I judged that rank appropriate."

Claudia's response seemed to please Christiana, who agreed that Emma had achieved something meriting this promotion.

"She fought two battles in a short period—and, in one, performed meritoriously. B rank does seem fitting. But would it work out? It'd mean Sub-Lieutenant Rodman received missions befitting B rank in future."

Knight ranks weren't mere decoration. They were an evaluation of a knight's skills, and higher-ranked knights received more difficult missions within their army. After a promotion, you couldn't claim you didn't actually *have* the abilities you'd been promoted for. If a knight received a rank they didn't deserve, all that awaited was a quick death. There was no revoking a rank promotion, and if Emma was found lacking in her new rank, it would affect Claudia's reputation as her reference. Christiana would've preferred Emma gain experience at C rank first.

Claudia had additional reasons for her recommendation, however. *Christiana's right. But if the girl wants to get closer to the man she most admires, she won't succeed where she is now.* She knew who Emma was chasing after, which was precisely why she proposed they throw the girl into a harsh environment. *If you really want to be more like him, you'll overcome a challenge like this easily.*

She wasn't sending Emma down a harsh path out of jealousy. If the girl was serious about her goal, Claudia truly wished to help her achieve it. This was her way of encouraging Emma.

"I believe she can overcome the challenge," Claudia asserted.

Christiana smiled again. Her subordinate had submitted a troublesome request, but she was happy to see the other woman's personal growth. "I didn't think you'd go this far. You had a bad habit of never rethinking your evaluations of people once you made your mind up, but you've changed."

Claudia had never reappraised someone she'd deemed incompetent. The fact that she was so skilled herself worsened that tendency; from her perspective, *most* people were incompetent. In short, although she was talented, she had her own flaws. Christiana was pleased that interacting with Emma had helped make Claudia less unyielding.

"I evaluated her inaccurately. That's all there is to it," Claudia said, sounding sheepish.

"*He's* the one who managed to see Sub-Lieutenant Rodman's potential. You needn't blame yourself." Feeling like teasing her curt subordinate, Christiana pointed out a flaw in the report Claudia had submitted on the incident on Alias. "However, you didn't note the Melea and its escort vessels' desertion as a problem. I thought you'd use that as leverage to get them all discharged from the military."

If that desertion were punished, Colonel Baker would take responsibility and be executed; the rest of his crew would be discharged without negotiation,

which was what Claudia had always suggested.

But now, Claudia didn't pursue punishment for the crew's transgressions. "I was the one who decided we didn't need to count them among our forces. If anyone should take responsibility for their desertion, it's me." Defending the Melea and border region security force, she prepared to be punished on their behalf.

"I suppose you have a point. Things might've been different if you used those forces more effectively." Christiana giggled.

"Is that all, ma'am?" Claudia inquired. She was asking about her punishment; this couldn't be dismissed with a simple scolding.

"If you're looking for punishment, I'm sorry, but you'll have to give up on that. I believe I told you House Banfield was too busy not to use you. Going forward, you'll have to keep working for me."

Diligent Claudia frowned at that, unsatisfied with Christiana's response from a military discipline perspective, but her superior wouldn't budge.

"I'll approve Emma Rodman's promotion," Christiana told her. "But I can't change her assignment."

Hearing that Emma was stuck on the Melea, Claudia was again dissatisfied, since she'd also made a request as to the promoted Emma's duties. She didn't want the girl languishing someplace people were sent after demotion. Apparently, however, Christiana disagreed with her.

"May I ask why not? Leaving her there will waste her skill." Claudia seemingly wanted to reassign Emma at all costs.

Sighing, Christiana explained her reasoning. "We can't assign a knight who's only functional within a special unit just anywhere. Anyway, the Third Weapons Factory requested her services. They sent a very passionate plea for the incorporation of the sub-lieutenant's squad into their development team."

Since Emma had shown that she could pilot the Atalanta, the Third Weapons

Factory was very interested in putting together a special team to support her. Their eager request showed just how serious they were about recruiting Emma in particular.

Claudia accepted that this was probably inevitable, given Emma's unique skills. "She'll test-pilot a new craft for a while, eh?"

"Mm-hmm. They'll use the entire Melea as an experimental unit. There *is* something a bit troublesome about all this, though..."

Sighing, Christiana displayed the relevant data to Claudia. The Melea had several escort vessels, but each was outdated. Using them within an experimental unit hardly made sense.

When she saw the proposal to upgrade the Melea into an experimental unit, Claudia grimaced. The problem was the entity proposing the improvements.

"The Melea was made by the Seventh Weapons Factory...?"

Christiana nodded, her face rather unamused. "I assume they applied to upgrade the Melea intending to exploit Lord Liam to obtain the Third Weapons Factory's technology."

"Should objections be raised? We surely can't allow them just to use him like this," Claudia replied with some disgust.

Christiana shook her head. "Unfortunately, Lord Liam himself approved their application."

"Er...I see. I suppose my comment was rather impertinent." When she learned that Liam himself had approved the proposal, Claudia closed her mouth. She couldn't speak out against the ultimate voice within their domain.

At that point, Christiana swiftly signed off on Emma's promotion. "As of today, Sub-Lieutenant Emma Rodman is promoted to lieutenant. Regardless of her performance in her first battle, she made quite a contribution in her most recent foray... Not to mention that she caught the eye of Lord Liam himself."

Although somewhat startled, Claudia quickly acknowledged Christiana.

“You’re even promoting her *now*? Thank you, ma’am.”

That was the moment a rookie knight labeled “defective” achieved an unprecedented rise in status. Emma was now a lieutenant with a knight rank of B.

“Don’t mention it. After all, we’ll have plenty of work for the lieutenant. This is basically just advance compensation.”

After the incident on Alias, Emma had risen even higher than the elites she’d graduated with. Yet Christiana couldn’t help worrying a bit about her future.

“In all likelihood, things are about to get a lot harder for her,” she admitted.

In the park on Hydra, Emma reached a spot with a good view and sat on a bench, looking out over the planet. This was the same scenery she’d gazed at before heading to Alias. She’d been informed of her promotions to lieutenant and B rank a little earlier, but thoughts of justice occupied her mind for the moment. Of course, she was happy to escape the stigma of being deemed a defective knight, but the mission she’d just returned from had given her a lot to think about.

“What *is* justice to me?”

After hearing that Liam called himself a villain, Emma had begun to think deeply about the “justice” she’d always pursued. It didn’t sit right with her that the person she’d long emulated referred to himself as evil.

She’d always wanted to be a knight to protect those weaker than herself, and she still felt that way. But the person embodying everything she desired to be described himself in a way that conflicted with that. Apparently, the man she’d always admired most wasn’t a knight of justice after all... Was it even right to idolize Liam in the first place? Either way, that “villain” seemed more righteous than she herself felt.

Gazing over the peaceful planet of Hydra, Emma considered right and wrong.

At some point, without her realizing, the old man she'd met up here appeared beside her and sat on the bench next to her. His sudden appearance surprised Emma, who jumped and let out a yelp.

"Grandpa?! You should've said something. You scared me."

"I apologize. But it's not very good if an ordinary person like me can sneak up on a knight."

"Well, sure. You've got a point..." *Is this my fault? And who is Grandpa, really?* They'd been acquainted a long time, but Emma hardly knew anything about the old man.

In any event, he smiled warmly at her, happy to see her again. "I'm glad you came back safely."

"...Yeah." Emma was glad as well, of course. But since her mind was occupied, she was still frowning a bit.

"It seems something's bothering you," the old man said, sensing her internal conflict. "If you don't mind confiding in an old man, why not tell your pal Brian what's on your mind?"

When the old man—Brian—asked what was troubling her, Emma looked at the sky and explained what she was thinking about. "Well, I've been trying to be just like someone. But I found out he isn't actually a knight of justice after all."

"Ah, I see..." The old man put a fist to his mouth and thought for a moment.

"I always thought he was just. But he actually calls himself a villain," Emma continued. "I never really knew anything about him, and I wasn't seeing the real him either."

Emma couldn't believe a "villain" had created the peaceful scene before her, but that was how Liam described himself.

"Grandpa, did you know that the count cut down a corrupt official when he was just ten years old? When I was ten, I only played around... Everything about the two of us is different."

At the same age when she'd done nothing but play innocently, Liam had executed an underhanded bureaucrat to better his domain. His resolve and willingness to take matters into his own hands were leagues from Emma's.

"Is trying to be like him presumptuous?" she asked the old man.

Emma didn't know what was right. She didn't have the resolve Liam did when he became a villain in order to create this park's view. She couldn't help feeling it was wrong to compare herself to someone who walked such a cruel path for his subjects' sake. The blitheness with which she'd previously pursued justice shamed her.

"Was I wrong?" she added.

"The count you speak of is kind," the old man told Emma. "He understands his own actions better than anyone."

"Grandpa?"

Gazing down, the old man gently continued explaining. "He had to become strong to protect Hydra. Stronger than anyone. He had no choice but to stain his own hands with blood."

"What's wrong, Grandpa? You're acting like..." Like he'd watched over the count from nearby all that time.

"If you think of him as a villain, you're not wrong."

"R-right..." If that was what the count called himself, that must be what he was.

"However, I don't think of him that way," the old man continued.

"Huh? But..."

"You must keep facing your own heart. Ask it whether he's a villain to *you*, or a knight of justice."

Emma put a hand to her heart, asking herself, *Who is he to me?*

Wondering whether he *was* villainous, she listened for her heart's voice to

answer.

As she posed the question, she felt almost like she could hear a young girl yell from somewhere deep inside her that that was wrong. The voice shouting was Emma herself, when she'd been young—the girl who saw the Avid that day and decided to become a knight. *“Just look at the view in front of you! Look at the smiles of the people living here!”* the girl objected. *“No matter what anyone says...I'll believe in him...even if he calls himself evil.”* As the young Emma told her current self that, their eyes locked.

Emma felt like her younger self was mad at her. Smiling, she wiped away the tears in the corners of her eyes. “I really do think ‘knight of justice’ fits him better than ‘villain.’”

Back then, that knight fighting for justice was my role model...as he is now.

Watching Emma, the old man rubbed his eyes. He must've liked her answer. “I'm sure he'd appreciate your feeling that way... His face wouldn't show it, but he's rather shy, you know.”

Standing slowly, he added, “Things will only get harder. In accepting that special craft, you acknowledged that a certain amount is expected of you.”



“Yeah.” Hearing him renewed Emma’s determination. *I don’t have time to mope around like this. I decided to take this path, after all.*

What would she see, chasing after the count like this? She couldn’t even imagine yet.

As he left, the old man gave her some parting words: “I expect much from this young knight’s future.”

That was when Emma finally realized she hadn’t told the old man about the “special craft.”

“Huh? How’d you know about the Atalanta, Grandpa? Wait... I-it couldn’t be... Were you the one who sent it to me?!”

Turning back around, the old man shook his head with a wry smile. “It wasn’t me. It was... No, I probably shouldn’t say.” He tried to leave without telling her.

Emma called after him. “Wait! Tell me, Grandpa!”

“I-I won’t! You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Why not?! I want to thank them!”

Checking the time on his terminal, the old man scurried away, using the obvious excuse that he had something to do. “Whoa! It’s already that late! I’m a busy man, you see. I should be getting back now.”

He left. Emma watched him go, her cheeks puffing angrily.

“He could just tell me...”

Since she had no idea who Brian really was, there was no way for her to even guess who might’ve sent the Atalanta.

BONUS STORY:

The Award Ceremony

WHEN THE BORDER REGION security force returned to the planet Hydra, an award ceremony in House Banfield's mansion awaited them. Colonel Baker and the Third Platoon members would receive medals for their contributions during the incident on Alias.

Of course, though "award ceremony" was a grand-sounding description, House Banfield's scale was such that someone received some sort of award practically daily. There were no grand, lavish ceremonies unless an award went to a hero who'd fought a battle of epic scale. Lord Liam Sera Banfield wouldn't even make an appearance at this ceremony. Although it had a slightly formal tone, it was little more than a bureaucratic event.

Still, receiving a medal was an honor for any knight or soldier. Emma donned her formal knight uniform for the first time in a while specifically for the ceremony. She arrived safely at the mansion—but it was so huge, she got lost.

"Where *am* I?!" she wailed.

Count Banfield was a count in the Intergalactic Algrand Empire. His territory spanned several planets, and he was one of the empire's higher-ranked nobles. Thus, what was called his "mansion" was so large, it could easily have been termed a "city."

Emma was little more than a girl lost in an unfamiliar metropolis. Tears in her eyes, she opened her terminal, searching desperately for the building where the award ceremony would occur. The terminal attempted to navigate for her, but construction was happening on the shortest route, so she couldn't go that way.

"If only I hadn't wandered off to explore..."

Emma held her head and trembled, picturing herself arriving late to the award ceremony. Knights simply weren't allowed to make such blunders.

She was at her wits' end when a passerby dressed in a maid uniform stopped near her. The black-haired, red-eyed maid looked her over and asked, "Do you require assistance?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, thank you so much! Now I'll make it to the award ceremony on time!"

"I'm glad I could be of service."

Following behind the maid, Emma gaped at everything they passed.

"This mansion's sure huge... Does it really need to be this big?" she asked bluntly.

"Well, Count Banfield is a lord," the maid explained matter-of-factly. "He must make a show of his status to some extent."

To Emma, a count in the Algrand Empire practically existed above the clouds. Even though she logically understood the reason for the mansion's size, it was difficult to accept emotionally.

"I think it could stand to be a *little* smaller..."

Hearing Emma's honest opinion, the maid stopped and turned around. Emma worried for a moment that she'd said something rude. The maid didn't seem angry at all, though.

"Master says the same thing—that he let it get too big accidentally."

"'Master'? The master *you* work for?"

"Yes. He is a kind person who treasures us."

Hearing that the maid worked for a resident of the mansion, Emma mused, *Her boss is someone important who lives here... Huh...?*

At that point, she finally noticed the marks on both of the maid's exposed shoulders. *This maid... She's a robot.*

The maid robot seemed to notice Emma's realization. She pointed up at a building. "The award ceremony is being held in there. If you take this street, you should reach it easily. I will take my leave." She bowed her head and turned around.

"Um, thank you so much!" Emma said hastily. "I'm Emma! Emma Rodman."

When Emma introduced herself, the maid stopped and turned back. She tilted her head for a moment, then swiftly corrected her posture and curtsied.

"I appreciate the polite introduction. My designation is Ibuki." She seemed almost to have a smile on her face.

"That's an unusual name."

"Yes, but it's a precious name I received from my master."

"It's important to you, huh?"

"It is. Well, Lady Emma... I'll root for you in your future endeavors." The maid robot Ibuki smiled, turned around, and left.

Emma arrived at the award ceremony just in time to avoid being late, but Colonel Baker still scolded her.

BONUS STORY:
Claudia Beltran's Facade

E MMA'S INSTRUCTOR, Claudia Beltran, was one of House Banfield's most talented knights. In rank—which measured a knight's capability—she was AA, the second highest possible category. She was also a gifted commander. She held the position of colonel in House Banfield's army, but since she often commanded fleets, she was more like a general in practice. She was also infamously harsh with both enemies and allies.

“How can you call yourselves knights, throwing in the towel after a training session like that?!”

Claudia's face was masked by that of a demon instructor as she coached new recruits in the training room. All around her, burly knights had collapsed to the floor, out of breath and covered in sweat. They lacked even the strength to get off the ground. Some wept at how rough the training had been.

As Claudia looked down at them, her eyes just grew colder. She'd completed the same course herself and was hardly breathless at all. She was sweating slightly, and her face had flushed a little, but that was it.

“We're done here today. But if you shame yourselves like this again—”

The rookie knights looked up at Claudia despairingly as she exited the training room without finishing her sentence. She'd left the rest unsaid to light a fire under them.

Some of Claudia's subordinates—people who'd been with her for years—rushed to her.

“Are you trying to crush them, Colonel? Go a little easier on them, would you?”

They were only concerned for the rookie knights, but Claudia responded just

as coldly as she'd spoken to the recruits.

"Will enemies spare them on the battlefield, just because they're rookies? Now that they're knights, it doesn't matter whether they're new recruits or veterans. All we can do is train them, hoping that as many as possible survive out there."

Claudia walked away. Watching her go, her subordinates sighed.

"She's so blunt..."

Returning to her quarters, Claudia sighed.

"Too harsh, am I...?"

She couldn't completely shrug off her subordinates' criticism, but her desire to protect her forces won out over their words.

"I don't care whether they hate me, as long as many as possible survive..." she muttered, glancing at a doll she kept in her room.

She had very few personal belongings in her quarters. One was this Little Liam doll, something very difficult to obtain. From her normal demeanor, it was hard to imagine her owning a doll like this; however, she treasured it.

Claudia embraced the precious toy. "My only solace on this ship is the feeling of this doll in my arms..."

She lay in bed and fell asleep, cuddling her Little Liam doll.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for purchasing *I'm the Heroic Knight of an Intergalactic Empire!* Volume One. Yomu Mishima, the author, here.

I'm sure some readers saw the title and cover and went, "Oh?" Just as you might've suspected, this is a spinoff of another of my works: *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!* I planned to simply post this story online; at first, I never expected to publish it. I originally called it *My Dear Evil Lord!* and wrote it with the same lighthearted tone as the other title. Basically, I just wanted a vehicle for stories I couldn't fit into the main series, and decided to create a casual spinoff. Of course, while this *is* a spinoff, I tried to write it so that it's enjoyable on its own merits as well.

It's a bit less polished than the main series, and stars a heroine, Emma, who has a lot of growth to achieve over the course of the story. I never thought it'd be adapted into a novel. I also never expected it to go on sale simultaneously with Volume Six of the main series. Heh.

In any case, it's thanks to you, my readers, that this work could be novelized. I'll keep working hard in the future, so I appreciate any support you want to give me.

*None the wiser that she owns
a super-rare item!*



Thanks for your continuing support.

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Table of Contents

- [Color Gallery](#)
- [Table of Contents Page](#)
- [Title Page](#)
- [Copyrights and Credits](#)
- [Prologue](#)
- [Chapter 1: A Defective D-Ranker](#)
- [Chapter 2: The Border Region Security Force](#)
- [Chapter 3: The Masterpiece Moheive](#)
- [Chapter 4: The Third Platoon](#)
- [Chapter 5: The Space Pirates](#)
- [Chapter 6: An Emergency Deployment](#)
- [Chapter 7: The Jager Squad](#)
- [Chapter 8: Banfield Demons](#)
- [Chapter 9: Sacrificial Pawns](#)
- [Chapter 10: The Atalanta](#)
- [Chapter 11: A Prodigy](#)
- [Chapter 12: The Man She Most Admired](#)
- [Epilogue](#)
- [BONUS STORY: The Award Ceremony](#)
- [BONUS STORY: Claudia Beltran’s Facade](#)
- [Afterword](#)
- [Newsletter](#)