
NOVEL
3
I'M THE HEROIC KNIGHT OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPIRE
WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
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Nadare Takamine

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MARIE
HAYDI
"Just watch."
"No need to be scared. There's nothing to be afraid of."
EMMA


She couldn't bear the thought of Emma's efforts being squandered.
"Do you seriously think this would've happened without her?"
MOLLY


"So...you're no match for me either."
SG-F04
GLADIATOR
NATHAN

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YOMU MISHIMA

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NADARE TAKAMINE

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

THE SEVENTH WEAPONS FACTORY was based on Neia, a collection of attached asteroids. In addition to that factory, Neia also contained a residential area.

In a commercial district just as organized as one would expect of the Seventh, a certain group was doing some shopping around noon. The group—which didn't seem to consist of a family, nor friends—were loading their purchases into the trunk of a large, nondescript vehicle in the parking lot.

One of them, a girl with a short bob haircut, wore a knight's uniform with House Banfield's insignia on it. Her name was Emma Rodman. In House Banfield's internal ranking system, she was ranked B, and her title in their private army was "lieutenant." Emma hardly looked old enough to be a soldier, but she was in fact a knight who had already survived several harsh battles. After serving as the test pilot of the Atalanta, an experimental mobile knight created by the Third Weapons Factory, Emma had received that prototype officially; thus, she was now a knight with her own personal craft.

Despite having been relegated to a no-name unit just after graduating from the knight academy, she was now acknowledged as one of House Banfield's more promising new knights.

At the moment, she was preparing for her next mission.

"Okay. That should do it for personal shopping," Emma said, loading her heavy luggage into the vehicle. She couldn't help smiling with the satisfaction of finishing a task.

As Emma wiped sweat from her brow, her platoon's assigned mechanic—Private First Class Molly Burrell—glanced at the items the knight had just packed into the car, her eyes wide.

Molly was a girl whose clothing stood out more than her long pigtails. On her lower half, she wore cargo pants, while on top, only a single strip of cloth covered her chest. She often drew attention from those around her, particularly males, but that didn't seem to bother her in the least. And Emma and the rest of the squad were so used to the way Molly dressed that it didn't faze them either.

Given Molly's clothes, she didn't really seem that much like a soldier, but her skills with machinery were the real deal. She was without a doubt an extremely talented mobile-knight mechanic. The only problem was that serving in the army didn't particularly suit her personality. She didn't care much for rank, so despite her skill, she hadn't gone far in the military. Emma was supposed to be her commanding officer, but Molly treated her more like a friend. That didn't bother Emma overall, but in this particular instance, it was a bit of a problem.

"Aah!" Molly exclaimed. "Did you buy more plastic models, Emma?"

When the mobile-knight models she'd stuffed deep into her shopping bags were discovered, Emma's eyes darted a bit. "Wh-what's wrong with that? I paid for them with my own hard-earned money."

She spoke as if there was no problem with what she'd done, but clearly, she felt guilty when someone pointed out her wasteful spending.

Larry Cramer, another member of their platoon who'd come along on their shopping trip, sighed and gave the shifty Emma a look. "More of those things? I saw you putting one together a little while ago. How do you not get bored doing that?"

Larry, who wore his hair long in front to cover one eye, was a warrant officer. Emma was his commanding officer as well, yet he spoke to her as if she were just some girl who was younger than him.

His attitude annoyed Emma. She glanced at the items *he'd* bought and complained, "Well, what about you? You just bought more games, right? Don't you have enough of *those*?"

Larry had purchased a portable gaming system. Evidently unhappy about Emma comparing her own hobby to his, he explained what he'd bought in minute, biting detail.

"An amateur like you might not understand, but each of these is unique. They vary by country, region, and planet. Some have games that are only available in a specific part of one individual planet. For your information, this particular system has a best-of collection made up of famous titles. And not only is each system

interesting in its own right, they're all a bit different. The way their controls all differ slightly is a testament to the various cultures that produced the games."

Feeling defensive after Larry's informational diatribe, Emma hesitated, unable to come up with a good retort. "You need to buy a whole system to play them? I thought you could do that online nowadays."

"Sure, you can play whatever's available in your particular region. But it's not like you're guaranteed to have access to it all the time, right?"

After all, they could be sent on a mission someplace that lacked access to whatever Larry wanted to play. Their access might be limited during a mission as well.

Emma decided to concede the point. While she wasn't perfectly satisfied, she felt as though she'd lost the argument; on top of that, she realized further arguing would be pointless.

"Duly noted. I get it, already. I shouldn't have said it!"

When Emma acknowledged her loss, Larry flashed a victorious grin.

Molly stood with her hands on her hips, watching the pair with exasperation. "You're both just as bad as each other. I mean, we all know how many of those game things Larry has."

Larry's reaction to Molly was much more benign. "I won't deny it. I love this one's retro feel, though."

"You display them in your room, right? I saw your wall once. It was all game systems."

"And what's wrong with that? Deciding which one to play every night is the best part of my day."

The two grinned as they spoke. Watching them, Emma couldn't help feeling that there was still a rift between her and her squad mates. She did her best not to get too down about it.

They're more accepting of me than they were before, right? Maybe we'll even be like a normal platoon soon...

She had a sort of vision of an ideal platoon, and though her squadron was still nowhere near it, they were closer than they had

been. At least, she thought so.

As the three chatted, Warrant Officer Doug Walsh finally arrived, a little late.

He was a bearded man, the oldest of the four of them. Alcohol bottles poked out of the shopping bags that filled both his arms.

“Sorry. I tried to get ’em shipped directly to the Melea, but they were running late.”

“You bought a ton of alcohol *again*?!” Emma asked the grinning Doug.

Doug packed the bottles into the trunk of the car, then got into the back seat. “I got snacks too.”

“That’s not what I asked!”

When Doug got in, Molly and Larry shrugged and did likewise. Molly sat in the passenger seat and Larry in the back; the only place left for Emma was the driver’s seat. The car drove automatically, so there was no need for Emma to do so herself, but it was still nowhere near a suitable seat for a commanding officer.

Getting into the car last, Emma told herself, *Just grin and bear it. If I work at it, they’ll become my ideal platoon sooner or later.* Face twitching, she sat in the driver’s seat and started the vehicle.

“Let’s head back to the Melea.”

As soon as she voiced that they were returning to their mothership, Doug slapped his forehead as though he’d just realized he forgot to buy something.

“Crap. I forgot that the colonel asked me to run an errand for him. Can we stop by somewhere first?”

After Doug spoke up, Larry and Molly soon joined in.

“If we’re already stopping somewhere, I want to go past a specialty gaming store. We’ve got time, right?”

“Whaaat? Then I want to get something to eat. Oh, I know! Let’s go get cake or something, Emma!”

Emma’s face continued to twitch as she responded to her subordinates’ demands. “V-very well.” *Grin and bear it. Just grin and bear it, Emma!*

Such was the current state of the Third Platoon that Emma commanded.

***

Emma's squad returned from their shopping trip more or less when they'd planned to.

The Third Platoon's members proceeded down the halls of the Melea lugging bags that contained their purchases. There was no gravity, so they held their bags in their arms, keeping everything together with nets.

Emma was relieved that they'd made it back on time, but she was sweating from how quickly they'd had to rush to do so. "We made it somehow…"

She clung to her bags as if they were precious to her. Meanwhile, Doug smiled, popping the lid on one of his bottles.

"Why would we have to worry about being late? We're not shoving off until tomorrow."

As he started drinking, Emma pondered which point to reprimand him on first. Eventually, she gave up on mentioning the alcohol. "We only took so long because you three have such a careless attitude about punctuality. We should've been back much earlier."

"You think Colonel Baker would really care? And did you see how few cars were in the hangar? None of the other platoons are back yet."

Only Emma's Third Platoon had returned on time.

When Doug mentioned the other platoons, Larry complained, "So we lost out on time off because our commander's such a stickler for rules. Man, I'm jealous of the other platoons…"

Molly chided him for his attitude. "Hey, don't be like that, Larry."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Emma's a hard worker, you know. Who do you think we have to thank for those new craft we just got?"

“Don’t bring up stuff from two years ago. How long are we supposed to be grateful for those?” Larry was responding to Molly. However, his eyes were directed at Emma, telling her, *I don’t owe you anything just because we got those new craft.*

Emma clutched her belongings to her chest. *My efforts so far haven’t been enough. Do I have to get stronger for them to acknowledge me as their leader?*

Still feeling disgusted at her own shortcomings, Emma noticed an unfamiliar group coming toward them from the far end of the passageway. And it wasn’t just her who noticed them; Doug, Larry, and Molly stared at the approaching group as well, since its members wore knight uniforms.

Emma paused in surprise. She’d thought that she was the only knight on the Melea.

Just when the other group was about to pass hers, the young man at the front called out to her. “Long time no see, Rodman.”

“Huh? Wait. Is that you, Russell?”

When she said his name, the young man gave her a look of obvious contempt. He indicated his rank insignia, warning Emma about her casual attitude toward him. “Can you not see this insignia? I’m a captain now, Lieutenant Rodman.”

His name was Russell Bonner. He’d graduated from the knight academy at the same time as Emma. But while the two were both knights, they had traveled completely different paths up until this point. Russell had done extremely well at the academy and been promoted to lieutenant upon graduating, proceeding down an elite course. Since he’d reached captain since then, he’d obviously made good progress.

That was why Emma couldn’t believe she was seeing him here.

“Russ—Captain, what’re you doing on the Melea?” She asked that out of genuine concern, worried that Russell had made some sort of mistake and ended up being sent here as a demotion.

Russel gave her a surprised look, then a scornful one. “What, you don’t know anything? My platoon’s joining the Melea for this mission. You should’ve received notice of that.”

He spoke as if it was ridiculous that she didn't know what he was talking about. But she really didn't, so she turned to her squad mates, wide-eyed. She thought the three of them would be equally confused.

However, Doug reacted like he'd just remembered something. "Oh, yeah. The colonel said something about that... We're getting a squad of mobile-knight pilots or something for this mission."

His information was awfully vague. Maybe he'd gotten it while drinking.

"You should've told me if you knew that!" Emma barked at him.

"Sorry. What difference does a few visitors make, though?"

The furrow in Russell's brow deepened as he observed Emma, who'd been unaware of this information, and her subordinate, who didn't seem the least bit repentant after her scolding. The two people behind Russell sniggered.

One was a woman. "She's blaming her subordinate! Shouldn't she know the details of her own mission?"

The other was a man. "This place is even worse than the rumors say, Commander Bonner."

Russell walked off with one last parting shot at Emma: "You aren't fit to be a knight after all."

"Huh?!"

Emma hung her head and clenched her fists, unable to refute someone whose career path had been so different from hers.



Chapter 1:
A New Job

A MAN AND A WOMAN sat at the counter of a members-only bar in an urban area on a certain planet. The bar was on one of the top floors of a high-rise, so it had a beautiful view of the cityscape at night. But the man and woman at the counter had their backs to that view, sparing it not so much as a glance.

The man wore a smile and an expensive suit that matched the bar's classy atmosphere. Despite the late hour, he was dressed to the nines, not a hair out of place nor any sign of fatigue on him anywhere. One might think he simply had no work to do, but the woman knew how busy he was. She figured that he'd likely already completed several tasks that day, and that he intended to go right back to work after having a drink with her at the bar.

His name was River, and he was known as the Undying Salesman. He had no surname, and no one was sure whether the name he went by was genuine. As for his workplace, he was employed by one of the Algrand Empire's weapons factories.

He spoke sweetly to the woman seated beside him, a faint smile on his face. "It was a real shame that the attack on the Seventh Weapons Factory failed. The people up top were *not* happy about that. They practically bit my head off over it." He was using that cloying tone to imply, *The higher-ups are pissed because of you, and I had to take the fall for it.*

The woman sitting next to him wore a dress that left little to the imagination. It bared both shoulders and ample cleavage, and a long slit in the skirt exposed her thighs. The woman in the dark-red dress, listening to River's complaints, was Sirena. Her hair was silver, her eyes a dull green. Her good looks and elegant conduct drew the eyes of plenty of men and women at the bar.

Though Sirena was aware of the looks she was getting, she paid them no mind, instead staring into the liquid in her cocktail glass. "Failed? That's not how I see it. I completed the mission I was given. I damaged the target and destroyed the prototype."

Sirena displayed no remorse, but River wasn't angry with her. He shrugged, looking amused if anything. "I don't mind such shamelessness."

Although River seemed to have a good impression of her, his reaction creeped Sirena out. He was acting like a different person than he had the last time they'd spoken, which didn't sit right with her. "When I reported my results, you weren't exactly happy."

River played dumb. "Was I not? Hmm. You may be right." He made a show of thinking about it before behaving as though he'd forgotten completely. "In any case, I called you here tonight because I have a new job for you."

River pulled up the materials relevant to the job on his tablet, then displayed them atop the bar. With those materials in front of her, Sirena narrowed her eyes.

As the small talk ended, and they moved to business, her tone became a bit harsher. "So House Banfield is getting involved in the Empire's succession conflict."

River's documents were on House Banfield, a noble family to which he and Sirena were both connected. That family, which was headed by a count, was experiencing a meteoric rise within the Empire—and had just gotten involved in the conflict between the candidates to be the next emperor.

To Sirena, the whole thing came off as utterly foolhardy. The count seemed no different from a noble in the boonies who'd gotten full of himself and thought that his influence would extend all the way to the big city.

"Yes. And it's thrown its support behind Prince Cleo," River added. "He's third in line for the throne, but the individual least likely to inherit it."

When Sirena heard that, she did a double take. "Does Count Banfield even intend to be on the winning side?"

Her surprised reaction seemed to disappoint River. "Everyone knows that much. I would've thought that you'd be more aware of the goings-on in the Empire."

Sirena scowled, turning her face away from River, who'd reminded her of how busy she'd been lately. "I haven't had time,"

she grumbled.

Sirena led the Dahlia Mercenaries. That organization had attacked the Seventh Weapons Factory, destroying the Atalanta, on a job for River. Sirena had lost most of her forces in the process, and since then, she'd been busy replenishing their numbers and training her new troops. At the same time, she'd had to take on work to keep her group going. She'd been running herself absolutely ragged lately.

She had all sorts of complaints tied to River, but she kept them to herself, answering him vaguely; she didn't want to show him any weakness.

He wasn't letting her get away with that, however. "Because you've been busy replenishing and training your forces? I hear you pushed yourselves quite hard last time. Will you be able to take *this* job?"

He must already have looked into why she'd been so busy. "You're a real creep, you know that?"

"Believe it or not, I still have a rather high opinion of you," River informed her. "After all, even after losing most of your forces, you've remained in a top position within a massive organization like Vulture."

Sirena wasn't particularly happy about that compliment. It was true that she'd been rather reckless, and for the moment, it was hard to say that her forces were back at full capacity.

Although River himself seemed aware of that, he nonetheless explained the new job he wanted her to take. "Right now, things in the Empire are heating up between Prince Cleo and Prince Linus. Prince Linus's current strategy is to levy economic sanctions against House Banfield, you see."

That rural house had provoked the ire of Prince Linus, second in line to the throne, and was suffering the consequences. It was hard to say how that might relate to River's request, but the news was notable in itself. House Banfield's significance within the Empire was increasing rapidly; it had made its name known again and again over the last few decades. It was also a house that both River and Sirena had history with.

Sirena kept quiet, waiting for River to continue, and he explained further. “House Banfield seems to intend to improve its situation by doing business with other intergalactic nations, including the Rustwarr Union.”

Serena wasn’t expecting to hear that name, so she couldn’t help reacting to it. “I thought the Empire and the Union were like oil and water. I can’t imagine those dealings will go well.”

The Rustwarr Union practiced democracy. They wouldn’t likely see eye to eye with the Empire, which had a nobility system. It was less that the two nations didn’t get along, and more that those from one simply couldn’t understand how those from the other thought.

To the Union, the Empire was an unbelievable place where human rights weren’t respected. To the Empire, however, the Union ran in a way that defied all the logic they knew. Unable to understand one another, the two nations maintained fortresses on each side of their border, glaring suspiciously at each other. Since there were even skirmishes between them every so often, Sirena didn’t see how the two sides could possibly trade.

The plan to deal with the Union struck River as evidence of just how much trouble House Banfield had to be in.

“They must be desperate enough to grasp at straws,” he pointed out. “Don’t you think this could be an opportunity for us?” Namely, it could be a chance to deal House Banfield a final blow, now that it had been driven into a corner.

Sirena was interested in that idea. “What is it that you want me to do, exactly?”

River flashed her a pearly-white smile before delving into the details of the job. “On the surface, the Newlands Company will be dealing with the Union.”

That was a large mercantile firm operating within the Empire. They mostly did business with nobles on the Empire’s outskirts, and they had a large network of such people. The Dahlia Mercenaries had conducted business with the Newlands Company more than once in the past. Being familiar with the company herself, Sirena couldn’t imagine them helping House Banfield in the state in which it found itself currently.

“If House Banfield is on its way out, the Newlands Company wouldn’t side with it. A big company like that can be selective when choosing business partners.”

River gave Sirena some additional information. “It’s just one board member siding with House Banfield—Patrice Newlands. She’s related to the founder, and she has a personal connection to House Banfield.”

That made sense to Sirena. “It’s just a gamble by a board member, then. So, what—you want me to attack the Newlands Company’s convoy or something? Sorry, but I’ll have to turn you down.”

If House Banfield’s involved, it wouldn’t surprise me if a fleet of Banfield ships is guarding the convoy. With my forces on the mend, as they are now, I’m not going up against them… It’s plain as day that fighting them again would be the wrong choice.

As the leader of an organization, Sirena wanted to avoid entering a fight she knew she wouldn’t win. But as an individual, she had someone stuck like a thorn in the back of her mind.

Emma Rodman. The knight who dreamed of fighting for justice.

When Sirena pictured Emma’s face, her expression twisted sourly. *If that little girl’s still weighing on my mind, I’ve got a long way to go.* She sighed, attempting to focus once more.

“House Banfield may be on the way out, but its fleet is at the same level as the Empire’s elite forces. I don’t think even the Dahlia Mercenaries could beat them,” River said, giving her his honest opinion.

And he was right. House Banfield’s private army was well-known within the Empire for being terribly strong. In a fair fight, the Dahlia Mercenaries would likely stand no chance against them. Sirena had acknowledged their strength herself, but she still didn’t like the way River was talking about her organization, so she couldn’t help snapping back at him.

“If I weren’t still getting my forces back up to snuff, I could pull off an attack against them.”

River gave her an undaunted smile. “Well then, this state of affairs is just too bad, isn’t it? Let me get into the details of the job, in that case. What I want to request of you this time is assistance with transportation and negotiations.”

When he explained what he wanted them to transport and where he wanted them to bring it, Sirena thought for a moment. Then she responded, “Well, I don’t see why all the preamble was necessary. I’ll take the job, though.”

***

A fleet arrived at Asteroid Neia through a long-distance warp gate; House Banfield’s family crest decorated the ships within that fleet. The flagship that led the group was an eight-hundred-meter vessel painted purple to display to its allies exactly who was on board.

On the flagship’s bridge was the knight who’d been appointed commander of this mission. She stood with her hands on her hips, gazing out at the allied ships the fleet was about to rendezvous with.

Standing behind her and off to one side was a knight with a scruffy face. He was serving as her adjutant and the mission’s vice commander.

“So, what do you think of them?” he asked his commander. “It’d be nice if they were useful for something. What does your instinct tell you?”

He addressed the commander in a casual way that was at odds with typical military behavior, but neither his commander nor the other officers nearby batted an eye.

The commander turned around, her long purple hair fanning behind her. The slender but toned woman gave her opinion on their allies, her expression harsh: “They’re completely useless,” she told her adjutant with a graceful smile.

Her adjutant merely muttered, “That so?” with a wry grin.

Chapter 2:
A Rotten Lot

AMONG HOUSE BANFIELD'S SHIPS, the Melea—mothership to Emma and her Third Platoon—was classified as a light carrier. After undergoing resupply and maintenance at Asteroid Neia, the Melea met up with several other House Banfield ships for its next mission. The vessels idled in the space around Asteroid Neia. Some had just undergone maintenance and resupplied at the Seventh Weapons Factory, just like the Melea, and some had arrived through a warp gate. They all belonged to House Banfield, but the ships were otherwise unaffiliated.

Everyone who needed to be was gathered on the Melea's bridge. Colonel Tim Baker, commander of the border region security force and captain of the Melea, yawned.

"House Banfield must really be low on firepower to scrape the bottom of the barrel and get *us* involved."

Emma jumped at the colonel's self-deprecating criticism of their commanders. "Sir, maybe you shouldn't—"

Her eyes flicked to Russell, who was present for the purpose of their current mission. He stood a slight distance from the Melea crew members, peering out at the other gathered ships with his arms crossed.

Baker's words could've been considered insubordination, and a word from Russell could've gotten the colonel arrested for them. Emma had warned him because she realized that, but Russell didn't show any sign of acting on what he'd heard.

As Emma sighed in relief, the final ship to arrive opened a communication channel to the rest. On-screen appeared a scruffy knight wearing his uniform sloppily; not only was he dressed inappropriately for his position, but his attitude seemed poor too.

"Everyone gathered here for the special mission, listen up. I'm the mission's vice commander. The name's Haydi. We may not be together for long, but I hope it's a fruitful time."

The vice commander's casual greeting seemed to make a good impression on Doug, who was also present on the bridge. "I

thought all knights were straitlaced types. Guess this guy's not a typical knight."

Even Larry had a comment. "Who knows. Maybe he's cruel and twisted on the inside."

"Well, I'm not saying I want to get to know the guy, but he doesn't seem like he'll meddle with us too much, which makes him okay in my book."

Their conversation finally provoked a reaction from Russell, who gave the two a sharp look. "Quiet. The vice commander isn't done talking."

Doug and Larry looked away guiltily.

Naturally, Haydi had no idea what was going on aboard the Melea, so he continued with a smile up on the monitor. *"No need to be uptight about this mission. We're basically just running an errand."*

Beside Emma, Molly cocked her head upon hearing that. "If it's just an errand, isn't this a bit over the top? I mean, there're six hundred ships here, right?"

Almost as if answering Molly's question, Haydi went on, *"We're just guarding three large transport ships belonging to the Newlands Company. That said, our destination's in the Rustwarr Union. So everyone keep your guard up, okay? And don't cause any trouble. That'll be all!"*

After the call ended, the Melea's crew all stood around wide-eyed.

Emma couldn't help voicing her confusion. "W-we're going all the way to another country?!"

***

The fleet headed for the Rustwarr Union. They'd met up with the Newlands Company's large transport ships; the vessels were so enormous that they completely dwarfed House Banfield's escort ships. The thin, cylindrical ships were shaped simply, but they were several kilometers long. Since they'd been designed for nothing beyond transporting as much material as possible, they were rather

lacking in defenses, considering how massive they were. House Banfield's six hundred ships would make up for their limited fighting power; the Melea was one of those ships.

After the Seventh Weapons Factory's modifications, the Melea could carry fewer mobile knights. It acted as an experimental engineering ship now, so the space aboard was being utilized for things other than offensive ability. Of course, the ship had never possessed a full mobile-knight regiment in the first place, so they hadn't lost any personnel in that change.

Compared to before the upgrades, the ship's performance had improved, and its facilities were a lot more comfortable. The mobile knights now stationed aboard were detuned Raccoons, cutting-edge craft modified for use by an average pilot. They were fantastic vessels developed by the Seventh Weapons Factory, said to surpass Nemains, at least in terms of specs. The current Melea would be the envy of even the Empire's regular army.

Since its remodeling two years earlier, the ship had practically been reborn. Sure, the hangar was less spacious now, but it still had plenty of room. It was even furnished with a special maintenance area just for the Atalanta.

Molly, who had become the Atalanta's personal mechanic, was performing an inspection of the craft. Her backpack fixed to the mobile knight by a special arm, she floated in the zero-gravity hangar, checking each and every component on her tablet.

Molly was complaining about not having received a long vacation after finishing a lengthy mission. "It's pretty awful to throw us right into active service when we only just finished development testing. I mean, we worked so hard, and we don't even get a break first?"

Emma, who was accompanying Molly for this inspection, smiled wryly. "It proves how much they expect of us. The Melea's got state-of-the-art mobile knights now, you know!"

She looked out at the Raccoons lined up in the hangar, sticking out her chest with pride. Though her breasts were smaller than Molly's, they were a nice shape and would fit well in one's hand.

Molly glanced over at the Raccoons, her love of mobile knights improving her mood. "Sure, things are better than they were before.

But the *pilots* haven't changed at all, you know?"

"Ugh..." Emma clutched at her chest to show that the comment had hit home. The Melea had state-of-the-art technology now, but the people operating it weren't up to snuff by any stretch. Not only was the crew completely unmotivated, but the pilots weren't even trained properly.

Emma poked her fingertips together sheepishly. "Th-they're training a little more than they used to, at least," she pointed out, insisting that they'd changed.

Molly's response was cold, however. "Yeah, no. That's fizzled out. Doug and Larry have gone right back to the way they were before. I guess I'm happy about that, since it means everything's cleaner. I suppose the only downside now is that we don't have as much space."

Before, Molly had kept a personal collection of "treasures" in the unused hangar space. It consisted of bits of debris that were practically space junk; fixing up whatever they could use as a weapon in future had been Molly's hobby. However, the hangar's empty space had shrunk so much that there was no longer room for her treasures. That was Molly's only problem with the Melea's upgrades.

"Yeah, it's a bit more cramped, huh? Are you sad that you can't collect treasures anymore?"

The crew sometimes complained that the ship had been more comfortable before. Life should've improved after the upgrades; the Melea was certainly cleaner and better maintained than it had been. That wasn't enough for certain crew members, though. Some had even looked Emma in the eye and told her they preferred Moheives to their new mobile knights. At times, Emma couldn't help thinking that maybe she should just have kept her head down so she couldn't be held responsible for any of this.

When Emma started to brood, Molly gave her a toothy grin. "Nah. Now that I have the Atalanta and Raccoons, I don't need any treasure. I'll miss tinkering with that stuff, but I'm so busy doing maintenance now, I wouldn't have the time to mess around with it anyway!"

That reassured Emma. When she heard Molly going on about mobile knights, she couldn't help smiling as well. "Ah ha ha! That's just like you."

All of a sudden, a young male knight flew toward the two of them. It was Russell. He wore a pilot suit rather than his knight's uniform, and there was a scowl on his face.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Lieutenant."

"Russ—C-Captain!"

Catching a nearby pillar, Russell stopped. He pointed at Molly, simultaneously turning his face away from her. "Wh-what's going on aboard this ship?! Can't you get your subordinates to stop wandering around the hangar in their underwear?! Either way, it's regulation to wear a space suit in the hangar!"

In a space where mobile knights were maintained, no one could say what might go flying at any given moment, so crew were generally expected to wear a pilot suit or space-grade work clothes in the hangar. After Russell's warning, Emma recalled that rule as well.

"Come to think of it, you're right."

"'Come to think of it'...? Not a single person in here is wearing a space suit!"

Emma smiled wryly at Russell's naive reaction. "I brought that up a ton myself. But they never listened to me." *Why* would *they listen to me?* she mused.

The Melea was a dumping ground for delinquent soldiers, so they didn't tend to follow rules. Those working in the hangar wore whatever work clothes were most comfortable to them. There were even some people there who weren't doing any work at all, just messing around.

Russell seemed increasingly upset at the state of things on the Melea. "It's not just Private First Class Burrell. No one—your squad included—is doing any proper training, are they? They don't follow any regulations, and even on a mission, they just sit around and drink!"

Talking about it must have infuriated him even more. He was turning red, and not the kind of red he'd turned when he first saw

Molly.

Emma agreed with Russell, frankly, but couldn't bring herself to say so given the way he was acting. "Believe it or not, things are better than they were before!"

"They are?!" Russell gaped at her in shock for a moment, then covered his eyes with his hand. "When I heard that you'd assisted with developing that experimental craft, I thought you might've made something of yourself. But you haven't improved a bit, have you? You aren't fit to be a knight."

He'd said the same thing to her after they graduated from the knight academy, just before they headed to their respective assignments. When they reunited on the Melea, he'd said it once more—but it was the first time, at the academy, that Emma found herself recalling now.

She clenched her fists. "I can pilot a mobile knight now, and I've fought in battle too! I'm not the same as I was back when I couldn't do anything!" Why wouldn't Russell acknowledge her achievements?

As that question went through her mind, Russell gazed right at her. "Just looking at your squad, your failings are plain as day. You're a knight, yet you can't even lead a tiny platoon properly. There's more to being a knight than just fighting."

As their argument went on, the crew in the hangar gradually gathered around them. They couldn't hide their curiosity at the sight of two knights fighting about something.

Russell shot the Melea's crew a scornful look before proclaiming to Emma, "House Banfield can upgrade your equipment all it wants; if the people using that equipment are still rotten, it won't matter. That really sinks in here."

"You don't have to say it like that!" Emma snapped back at him.

But when she defended the mothership's crew, Russell just gave her a cold look. "You've let yourself rot without even knowing it here. It's really a shame. I used to think you at least had guts."

Having come to his own conclusions about the Melea from what he'd seen, Russell left.

Emma watched him go, shouting after him, “Wha—?! W-we’re not rotten! You take that back!”

Chapter 3:
The Elite Squad

THREE UNFAMILIAR MOBILE KNIGHTS had appeared in the light carrier Melea's hangar. The craft—Nemain variations, just like the Atalanta—stood out among the Raccoons that made up most of the units in the space.

Emma's Third Platoon observed the Nemain units from a slight distance away. Molly, in particular, was bursting with excitement before the new mobile knights.

"I never thought we'd get custom Nemain units on board! Their specs are supposedly twenty percent higher than a standard Nemain's, right? Ooh—I want to touch them, even if it's just once!"

The Nemain was the mass-produced mobile knight House Banfield used most. The customized units now aboard the Melea had received several improvements over the base model. Additional parts were attached to the Nemains' characteristic wing-shaped boosters, and their wingtips were sharper than a standard unit's. The plating on their arms was tougher, and antennae came out of the backs of their heads, which likely indicated an improved comms system. Even the heads had been designed differently to give them a special feel.

Looking at the custom craft, Larry frowned. His irritation likely stemmed from the special treatment the craft's pilots received. "Personal craft for the elite knights, eh? They're spending a pretty penny on them. Wish they'd allocate some of those funds to us lowly rank-and-file soldiers. I mean, deploying those knights here in the first place had to be a dig at us, right?"

Even among knights, only a select few received customized units. And these Nemains weren't just customized.

"They're prototype units for testing some additional equipment," Emma explained to the sulking Larry, "so deploying them to an experimental engineering ship like the Melea isn't that strange. We're equipped for that now."

Larry just looked away in irritation. He was likely aware of what Emma had said himself; he just didn't want to admit it.

Emma sighed. “You’re piloting a cutting-edge Raccoon yourself now, aren’t you, Warrant Officer? You don’t have to sulk just because some custom craft showed up.”

Her comment only served to upset Larry further. “I’m not sulking! We were treated like crap up until now! When they suddenly decide to change their minds, how do you expect us to react?”

Hearing Larry double down, Emma gave up on persuading him. *Our environment may be better now, but nothing else is different from before.*

As she mulled over how best to interact with her subordinates, Doug put a hand to his chin. “Stuff it, Larry. They’re the elite, and we’re not—end of story.”

Emma’s shoulders slumped at his spiteful words. “Not you too, Doug…”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Captain Bonner’s squad *does* consist of elites, but…”

Russell and his two subordinates had graduated in the top one hundred of their knight academy class. That top hundred were promoted to lieutenant rank upon graduation and fast-tracked to the rest of their career. Their custom Nemains demonstrated the lofty expectations the military had of them.

Russell, who had been promoted to captain, headed the platoon, and his two subordinates were both still lieutenants. Emma knew that Russell was a talented pilot, and she’d heard the same about the other two as well.

As the Third Platoon watched them, one of the three knights—the woman—turned to face them. She had long, straight blonde hair and tan skin. She was thin, with a good figure, but something about her seemed shallow. This was Lieutenant Charmel Odent.

In just the flippant way they expected, she sneered at them and declared, “Captaaain! Those guys are staring at uuus!” She drew the words out in an affected whine.

When she addressed Russell, he just happened to be discussing something with his other subordinate, Lieutenant Jorm Barte. Jorm’s bangs hid his eyes, giving him a gloomy look. He was

smaller and more delicate than Russell; it was hard to say that he looked the part of a knight. Still, he was part of Russell's squad, which marked him as a talented knight in his own right. Emma was sure that his grades had been much better than her own.

Jorm glanced in their direction and smiled as well. "That girl was in your class, wasn't she, Captain? She's supposed to be some kind of genius pilot, the one they gave that new mobile knight to, but she doesn't look very intimidating, does she?"

From Emma's perspective, Charmel and Jorm were her juniors as knights, but the two clearly didn't respect her.

Noticing the Third Platoon's eyes on him, Russell scowled in obvious displeasure. "It sickens me. I know it's for the mission, but did it have to be *this* ship?"

He seemed disgusted by the Melea, which probably had something to do with how well known the ship was as a destination for the disgraced. He didn't even try to hide his feelings on the matter.

That upset Larry all the more. "Ha!" he scoffed. "None of us asked you holier-than-thou elites to come here! If you don't like it, go on and head home already."

Russell responded calmly to Larry's childlike provocation. "We do what we're ordered to. I'm not yet in a position to dictate which ship I ride on according to my own preferences. If *you* have complaints, you can go ahead and voice them to our superiors—though I doubt they'll listen to what you have to say."

Larry fell silent at that, but now it was Doug's turn to speak up. "Well, if you dislike being aboard the Melea so much, why don't *you* negotiate with the higher-ups? I'm sure they'd listen to oh-so-important elites like you."

At that point, Charmel and Jorm exchanged glances, cocking their heads. They'd seemingly gone past exasperation into bewilderment.

Russell looked like he was getting a headache. "If you think you can overturn orders just because you don't like them, this squad really is beyond help."

Doug was now seemingly cowed into silence as well.

Charmel shrugged. “When I heard that there was a B-rank knight like me here, I started looking forward to this a little bit. I guess I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up, though.”

“B-rank?” Emma repeated.

Charmel grinned, and Emma couldn’t help thinking the other knight was provoking her. “That’s right. I’m rank B, just like you. The captain’s still rank C, by the way.”

Charmel puffed up with pride, while Russell assumed an unreadable expression. He most likely wanted to call out his subordinate for disparaging her superior, but found himself unable to, since what she’d said was true.

“I’m still your boss, you know,” he told her.

“I knooow!” Charmel replied breezily.

Emma couldn’t hide her surprise; she couldn’t believe the girl in front of her was rank B, just like she was. *It should be impossible to reach rank B just after graduating from the knight academy.*

Emma was only rank B herself due to the Atalanta. She’d been promoted in recognition of her achievements during a major incident. Emma herself viewed it as a matter of luck. She had no idea how a younger knight had attained rank B and seemingly done so easily.

Her surprise must’ve been plain on her face. Jorm noticed it and explained the circumstances to her, disdain in his eyes. “Charmel—Char’s what you’d call a genius. Over just three deployments, she’s shot down fifteen enemy units piloted by knights.”

“Fifteen?!”

The Third Platoon was speechless. Fifteen wasn’t the number of rank-and-file soldiers she’d shot down, but the number of craft piloted by *knights*—and even they understood how impressive that was.

Larry was baffled. “Three deployments? That’d mean she took down five knights per fight.”

Clearly pleased by their surprised reactions, Char gave Emma a provocative look. “And how many craft have you shot down, my

senior? Since you have that super-strong, fancy new unit, it's got to be in the triple digits by now, right?"

Char was bragging that she'd defeated fifteen knights in her custom Nemain; on the other hand, Emma didn't have much to brag about in the way of numbers. She hadn't even faced knights many times. She'd fought Sirena in the Gold Raccoon, but her adversary had gotten away in that battle.

In short, Emma's enemy-knight kill count was zero. She said as much, utterly sincere.

Char was taken aback for a moment, then held her stomach and burst into laughter. "That's pretty impressive in its own right, isn't it?! Did you get where you are now just by using connections or something? Great! It's really nice having friends in high places, isn't it?"

It frustrated Emma to be laughed at, but she couldn't argue; she had to admit that she didn't have much in the way of battle achievements.

Seeing how upset Emma was, Molly flailed around, flustered. Doug and Larry just looked away, clearly not intending to be of any help.

It was Russell who spoke up. "Leave it at that, Lieutenant Odent."

"Yes, siiir."

When Russell told her to, Char backed down obediently. She listened to her commander, and Emma could tell that she respected him. Seeing how well his platoon functioned just made her feel even more pathetic.

Someone else from my year is commanding his own platoon perfectly, and what am I doing?

Before she could sink into too deep a depression, an alarm sounded in the hangar. Emma and her squad froze; before they could react, Russell shouted, "Charmel! Jorm!"

The trio headed for their craft, already half inside their cockpits when Emma hurriedly ordered her own troops, "We're heading out too!"

***

As Emma and her Third Platoon got ready to sortie, Russell—who was already inside his custom Nemain—scowled with irritation. His monitor displayed what was going on around him; he could see that, though an alarm was sounding, the crew were moving far too slowly.

"What's wrong with these people? Just how long does deploying take them?!"

Russell's military performance thus far had been stellar. Nevertheless, he was well aware that people in his position could only shine with the support of those around them, and the scene before him was simply appalling.

"Sortie? Did we get orders to...?"

"Somebody else'll take care of it."

"Who's supposed to go out there?"

Jorm was just as appalled as he watched the mechanics in the hangar mill about. His face appeared in the corner of Russell's monitor. *"It's worse here than the rumors say. I understand why people get sent to this place when they screw up."* He seemed calm, but his voice was much colder than usual.

Even Char, who usually complained when they had to sortie, was now angry instead. *"These guys are way too laid-back."*

Char and Jorm had both graduated from the knight academy with top marks. The Melea's crew frustrated them immensely, since the crew members weren't even putting in the bare minimum effort.

Still, they didn't seem as infuriated as Russell. "Goddamn dregs of the old army!" he spat.

On his monitor, his two subordinates looked bewildered.

"The captain's awfully upset today," Jorm remarked to Char.

"You don't see that every day."

***

When the Third Platoon deployed from the Melea, the battle was already underway.

In the Atalanta's cockpit, Emma gritted her teeth. "This is the Third Platoon. Melea, requesting orders!"

They were clearly under attack from someone. Emma hadn't received any detailed information from her mothership, though, so she'd requested an update from one of its operators.

The response she got back was rather laughable. *"Let's see… there's two hundred ships…? No, three hundred…? I mean, they're probably space pirates, right? What do you want to do, Colonel?"*

When the operator requested orders, Colonel Baker's response was hard to believe. *"No need for us to get involved if it looks like our allies can handle it, right?"*

"That's his stance," the operator reported to Emma. *"But I guess you can provide support if you want."*

"Our allies are fighting out there!" Emma exclaimed, unable to stay quiet.

"Yeah, I know you want to test your favorite little toy out in a real battle, but I don't want you pulling any reckless stunts and getting Doug and Larry killed," Colonel Baker cautioned Emma coldly from the Melea's bridge*. "Provide support. That's the order you've received."*

No further communication came from the bridge, and Emma scowled in frustration. "It's no different from before…"

Russell's words were lodged in her heart. They could upgrade their equipment all they wanted; if the people using it were still rotten, it wouldn't matter.

That was when Emma noticed the exploits of a small squadron nearby on the battlefield. "Is that Russell's platoon?"

The three custom Nemains were engaging some mobile knights without many distinguishing features—Moheives, perhaps. Unlike the other space pirates Emma had seen, the enemy was using tactics that emphasized coordination between units. Despite that, Russell's platoon dealt with them handily.

***

In her custom Nemain, Char licked her lips. The mobile knight she was engaged with was clearly no average space pirate. “Wow. These guys are pretty strong.”

“Careful. They’re enhanced soldiers,” Russell warned her as she chased the enemy unit.

Char searched her internal database for that term. Enhanced soldiers weren’t something that came up often in the Algrand Empire, but its people were at least aware of the concept. It was part of the information instilled in her by way of an education capsule.

“Enhanced soldiers? Ah—they’re Rustwarr’s knights.” Although the Union called them “enhanced soldiers,” those forces were to Rustwarr what knights were to the Empire. Char didn’t particularly care about their presence one way or the other, except on one point: “That means they’re on par with knights when it comes to ability, right?”

“Right.”

When Russell acknowledged that, Char looked over the enemy units avoiding their attacks and smiled aggressively. “Then I’ll use them to raise my score!” she exclaimed with a laugh, swiftly moving her craft’s control sticks.

Pressing on a foot pedal to accelerate, she approached the enemy craft, avoiding their gunfire. As soon as she was close enough, she stuck a high-energy laser blade into a foe’s cockpit.

“That’s one!”

When Char took out their ally, the other enhanced soldiers identified her as a threat and rushed her. They seemed to emphasize coordination more than Imperial knights did, so this was less like fighting space pirates and more like warring with an organized army.

Still, Char could respond quickly to the enemies’ movements. She identified the least-guarded enemy craft and thrust her laser blade into its cockpit.

“That’s two!”

Kicking the downed craft away, she focused on her third adversary. After she'd destroyed her second enemy, the remaining combatants surrounded her craft.

"Don't be careless, Charmel!"

"Guess we've got to back her up again."

Russell and Jorm moved to provide her with support. They never failed to do so, despite complaining about her recklessness on the battlefield. As they moved in to assist, Char took out her third enemy, who was quickly followed by a fourth and fifth.

"That's five! Woo-hooooo! That's a bonus for me!"

Having giddily confirmed her fifth kill, Char immediately switched from acting on her own to providing support to Russell.

Jorm was past exasperated, yet he was almost impressed with how quickly she'd switched gears. *"I can't say you're not contributing, but don't you cool down a bit quickly as soon as you know you'll get a bonus after the battle?"*

"Well, what's the point of putting any more effort in?" Char asked breezily. "You've got to be efficient with your kill count."

"That's enough," Russell said, chiding them for their idle chatter. *"Let's go assist some allies who are struggling. Don't take your eyes off our escort either."*

Char didn't like Russell's overly serious attitude, but she listened to his orders regardless. "Got it. I'll do whatever you say now, Captain!"

Jorm sighed. *"Can't you put a little more effort in? It'd be easier for me if you did."*

"I'll think about it."

"Just like you've 'thought about it' all the other times, right?"

The platoon went off to assist any allies having trouble.

***

Emma was speechless when she saw what Russell's platoon was capable of. She was shocked by Char's shrewd focus on a post-

battle bonus, but she was most surprised by the girl's considerable ability.

"All three of them are strong."

Russell was awfully hard on Emma, but now she'd seen that he and his team could more than back up his words.

"Compared to them, I'm… My squad is…"

Glancing behind her, Emma saw two Raccoons following the Atalanta noncommittally. She could hear Doug and Larry's conversation too.

"Ignoring orders, are they? The colonel said not to pull any stunts."

"Not like they need to listen to him. They seem more than capable of making their own calls. Just goes to show knights always get special treatment."

Seeing Russell's squad in action had just set off their own inferiority complexes.

Pushing down the frustration and self-pity she felt, Emma issued an order. "Increase your speed. We need to get in there too!"

Doug and Larry's unmotivated replies came to her over the comms system.

"Fired up from your classmate needling you, huh?"

"Cut it out, Larry. Sure, sure, we'll hurry."

Though they still complained, they followed her orders now. Nonetheless, Emma had to wonder… Would it really be all right for her platoon to stay as they were?

Chapter 4:
Promising Youths

THE SPACE-PIRATE ATTACK was being discussed aboard the flagship that commanded House Banfield's fleet. Projected onto the monitor in the ship's reception room was a night view of a city. Going by the shipboard time, it was late; the reception room's lighting was low as well as two women faced each other.

One was Patrice Newlands. She had red hair and tan skin; a suit with a low neckline showed off her voluptuous figure. The young woman oozed sexuality and held a high position within the Newlands Company. The large transport ships House Banfield's fleet was guarding on this mission belonged to her.

The other woman, a knight, gazed at the city view on the monitor as Patrice addressed her. "I didn't expect to be attacked as soon as we entered space under Union control. This doesn't bode well. Still, I'm counting on you to protect those three ships. They might as well be carrying everything I own."

Those three ships were the only ones of that size Patrice owned, though she had smaller transport vessels. Their size wasn't the only special thing about them. All three ships were outfitted with bits of magic technology and spatial magic that allowed them to transport several times their physical capacity. Therefore, losing even one would be catastrophic for Patrice. If she lost two, she'd be more or less finished. Under those circumstances, it would take a miracle to recover her position within the Newlands Company's upper echelons.

As Patrice frowned uneasily, the knight with purple eyes and hair turned around to face her. Her long, silky hair fanned out around her as she spun. At first glance, she appeared thin and fragile, but a closer look revealed a knight's toned musculature. Her very flesh and bone were stronger than the average person's, allowing her to utilize power normally unthinkable for someone so lean.

The wielder of that inhuman strength was Marie Marian. She was one of the knights supporting House Banfield and was on par

with Christiana. As she turned to face Patrice, her eyes almost seemed to glow in the darkness of the room.

"We drove them off, didn't we? You have no need to worry. Marie Marian will see that your ships are protected." She put a hand on her chest and smiled.

Patrice sighed in response. "I hope that's true. The Union isn't the same as the Empire, however. The space pirates here won't be the same ones you're used to facing. From what I could see, it looked like your fleet struggled somewhat in that battle just now."

The space pirates in a different intergalactic nation would differ from the Empire's. The methods House Banfield was used to employing against pirates in the Empire wouldn't necessarily work on those operating within the Union. And it was true that the escort fleet had had trouble facing pirates of a different caliber than they were accustomed to; those pirates had used tactics utterly unlike those of Imperial pirates. Of course, pirates operated in multiple intergalactic nations, but most stuck to an area they considered their turf. The pirates they'd just fought *had* been very unlike those they were accustomed to facing—Patrice was completely right.

Marie smiled regardless, but it wasn't the smile she'd had on her face a moment ago. This was the smile of a ferocious beast with prey in its sights. "Whatever small differences there may be, pirates are all the same at their core, so hunting these ones will be just as easy. After all, my forces should be used to fighting them after that battle."



Patrice had heard that Marie was on par with Christiana, but she found the two women to be entirely different beasts. Christiana had the air of an ideal knight, but Marie seemed more like a ferocious warrior. She postured as a refined woman, but she couldn't hide the violence that always seemed to brim just under the surface of her facade.

Patrice shuddered, but Marie's confidence also heartened her. She smiled. "I hope you won't betray my expectations." She could only act so headstrong in front of Marie thanks to her past experience as a merchant negotiating deals with powerful people.

Marie nodded. "Of course. I'll see that we succeed here for *his* sake."

***

After meeting Patrice, Marie left the room and headed down the corridor. Given the time aboard the ship, the halls were just as dark as the room had been. Behind Marie and slightly to the side walked scruffy, messy-haired Haydi. As Marie's adjutant, he'd listened in on the meeting, but hadn't interfered.

"Must be rough entertaining the client like that, Marie."

Despite being her adjutant, Haydi referred to Marie casually, by her first name. That wasn't regulation, nor was it polite. Still, Marie didn't call him out on it. If anything, it made her feel comfortable.

"I would've forced it on someone else if not for *his* orders. You deal with her from now on, Haydi."

Haydi scratched his head. "You've got to be kidding. I can't put on a classy act like you."

"You got that right," Marie said with a grin, then wiped the expression from her face. "So? How are our allies?"

That question was vague, but Haydi was able to answer it—after a short sigh. Marie forgave that rudeness because of his abilities. If he were simply rude and incompetent, she wouldn't have chosen him as her adjutant.

“There’s no problem with their training or skill,” Haydi told her. “And, aside from one exception, morale is high. They’re a fleet that House Banfield can be proud of, same as any other. They’ve just got no experience, that’s all.” He’d started out cheerful, almost as if he was telling a joke, but had turned serious at the end.

From Haydi’s tone, Marie sensed what he meant. “So because we expanded the fleet, we ended up with more troops who lack real experience. I see why Patrice is worried.”

Although Marie had promised to protect Patrice’s transport ships, she couldn’t deny that her fleet was flawed. The “experience” she and Haydi were referring to was more substantial than one might assume, however.

Haydi shrugged. “They’re all pups who’ve only been in a few battles before now. If they’d come back alive from a hundred or so—no, from at least ten—battles, then we wouldn’t have to worry so much.”

The new recruits’ experience level concerned him and Marie. They didn’t see those who’d only experienced a handful of battles as any different from fresh recruits.

Haydi had more to say about one specific unit. “The worst of them was that group you specifically asked for, Marie. They just trembled in the rear.”

Marie’s eyes widened at the news that one of their contingents had hung back and simply waited for the battle to end. “What’d you say?”

Haydi knew that he’d angered Marie, but he didn’t backpedal. In fact, he went on to say something sure to anger her further. “That craft that was only developed thanks to *his* good graces didn’t do anything either. Want to know its kill count? Zero! That said, it *was* aboard a light carrier at the back of the formation; that carrier was seemingly a little late deploying too. They even held back that elite platoon you threw at them,” he went on, bringing up Russell’s squad as well. “Doesn’t seem like they’re delivering on what you wanted from them. So what are you going to do about it, Marie?”

The classy veneer Marie usually put on was nowhere to be seen now. Her true nature had come to the forefront. That was a sure sign that her anger was about to boil over.

“Call them to this ship. I’ll train them myself.”

As Marie walked off, Haydi shrugged. “Don’t break our promising youths, okay?”

“If this is enough to break them, then there was nothing promising about them in the first place,” Marie replied coldly.

***

“Can things really go on like this?”

After the battle with the space pirates, Emma was in her room, lying on her bed. The individual quarters allocated to her due to her status as an officer were stuffed with plastic models and the tools to assemble them. On the walls were special cases of liquid in which she could display her completed models. In the most eye-catching spot were figurines of the Avid and the Atalanta; she’d put the latter together using a Nemain model. She’d 3D printed the special parts for the model, and she was extremely proud of how it had come out.

In her room, surrounded by the plastic models she loved, Emma lay with her arms around her knees. “Russell’s squad did really well in the exact same situation as us. But even now that I have the Atalanta, there’s nowhere for me to show it off if I’m with the Melea.”

On Colonel Baker’s orders, she’d been relegated to support in the battle. She’d done nothing wrong herself; still, she couldn’t help thinking that that kind of occurrence would be a big problem if she wanted to improve things on the Melea. When you’d been outfitted with cutting-edge weapons and facilities, hanging back and not contributing was practically a betrayal of the house you were supposed to serve. Would House Banfield fault them for this and take away the Raccoons and Melea altogether?

The same question applied to the Atalanta. There was a good chance that Emma would be assigned elsewhere as its exclusive pilot, but what about the crew? What about the other members of the Third Platoon? The Melea had just been turned into an experimental engineering ship, but if they didn’t make use of it, its

crew would likely be removed. In that event, there'd be no place for them anymore in the army.

If they had no lives outside the military, but no longer had a place inside it, their new futures wouldn't be bright, would they? Emma couldn't help worrying about that until an order arrived on her tablet. She hastily set aside the pillow she'd been hugging and sat up, confirming her orders.

"Lieutenant Emma Rodman, you are to report to the escort fleet's flagship. A small vessel will be dispatched from the flagship. Report to the vessel with Captain Bonner's unit. You are to come alone."

She'd been ordered to the flagship alongside Russell's forces. Emma went pale. "Why do they want me in the middle of the mission? Are they disbanding my squad already?!"

She leaped out of bed and threw on her uniform, her stomach aching at the thought of what she might be told on the flagship.

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Eeeeek! I never expected something like this to happen!

Suppressing her desire to scream, Emma arrived on the flagship via a small spacecraft. She'd been called there alongside the three members of Russell's platoon. She'd expected to be reprimanded for her squad's rather half-hearted participation in the battle, but that didn't appear to be quite what was going on.

In the room Emma and Russell's squad had been brought to, the escort fleet's commander awaited them. Marie sat backward in a chair before them with an irritated expression, her arms around the chair back.

"So you went out onto the battlefield just long enough to say you did, then simply let the rest of the fleet take care of things for you. Do you have an excuse for that behavior that you think will satisfy me?"

In a way, this was exactly what Emma had expected. She was being reprimanded for her lackluster performance in the battle. But the bigger problem was the individual reprimanding her.

Marie Marian's rank in House Banfield's private army was lieutenant general. In the Empire's regular army, she maintained the rank of brigadier general. As for her knight rank, it was AAA—the highest there was. Higher even than that of Claudia, Emma's former instructor.

The woman in front of Emma was one of a handful of knights who could be said to represent House Banfield as a whole. Emma couldn't imagine what someone as important as Marie would want personally with the Melea.

The look on Marie's face was merely annoyed, but knowing the woman's track record and abilities, Emma felt wholly intimidated by her. Russell and his squad seemed to have the same response. Even Char was reining in her usual haughty attitude.

Utterly unable to respond to Marie's question, Emma watched Russell step forward instead. "Our mothership may not have participated," he replied, "but I assert that my own platoon contributed to the battle!"

Marie sighed. "I suppose I have to give you that. Under the circumstances, you put up a decent fight. If you were average knights, maybe I'd give you a round of applause and recommend you for a placement somewhere you could accomplish even more. But you're not average knights, are you?"

As Marie glared at each of them, the very air seemed to weigh more heavily on them.

"Ngh...!" Even Russell couldn't do anything but break into a cold sweat.

Marie stood and walked over to them. "You're treated better than standard knights, so do you really think you can go into battle and achieve only standard results? If you really believe something that stupid, I'll kill you myself right here."

The disconnect between what she said and the ladylike way she said it was somewhat ridiculous, but none of them laughed. They were certain that, if they did, their lives would be ended. Besides, everything Marie had said was true. Special treatment within the army proved that you were valued correspondingly highly by the organization. If you didn't deliver on your apparent value, it would obviously cause problems.

Marie focused on the silent Emma. “Pilot of the Atalanta.”

“Y-yes?!” Emma shot straight up.

Marie brought her face to Emma’s. She was beautiful in a different, more feral way from Christiana, and the sight of her stunned Emma for a moment. Marie’s sharp eyes quickly brought her back to reality, though.

“Why didn’t you participate in the battle?”

With those purple eyes gazing at her, Emma couldn’t look away. Her instincts told her not to avert her gaze. She couldn’t think of any clever way to respond, however, so all she could do was tell the truth.

“I-I was following orders.” She’d only been doing what Colonel Baker ordered her to, so the fault wasn’t hers, or so she claimed.

“‘Oh, well, in that case, I suppose there’s nothing you could’ve done’—is that what you thought I’d say?!”

Marie’s initial kind smile morphed into a demonic grin as she berated Emma, who felt all her hair stand on end as Marie’s expression turned deadly serious.

“Tell me what you think a knight is,” Marie directed.

“Huh?” For a moment, Emma couldn’t comprehend the question.

“Just answer. What do you think a knight is?” Marie repeated.

Racking her brain, Emma squeezed out an answer. “E-er, knights are people who’ve been educated and strengthened from a young age…”

Marie didn’t like her response. “That’s not the answer I’m looking for.”

Emma was just getting more and more worried that the Melea’s crew was about to be disbanded. *Oh… Whatever happens, happens!* Steeling herself, she said what she really felt. “Knights are heroes of justice! Knights…protect the weak!”

Her answer stunned Russell. He shook his head, disbelieving. “I didn’t think you were *that* stupid.” Emma’s answer was an ideal—something that anyone would think was naive, immature.

But Marie didn’t think that. She put her hands on her hips and laughed as if truly amused. “Good! That’s good, pilot of the Atalanta! Holding convictions that you won’t compromise on for anyone is the true essence of a knight!”

“Huh…?” She was shocked that Marie wasn’t angry at her ridiculous answer, and even more shocked that the other knight seemed to *like* it.

While Emma was frozen in surprise, Marie said in that haughty, feminine tone of hers, “In the Union, they call those who are like knights ‘enhanced soldiers.’ They treat them differently than how we treat knights.”

Citizens of Rustwarr who were strengthened from a young age went on to become enhanced soldiers, rather than knights as they did in the Empire. They also weren’t given the privileges and treatment Imperial knights received. The Union utilized its enhanced soldiers more efficiently than the Empire did its knights—as nothing more than tools.

Marie wiped the smile from her face again, standing before the four knights with a solemn expression. “If you just want to be a tool like an enhanced soldier, all you need to do is follow orders. But if you want to be a knight, you need the strength to carry out your own will.”

The four all wondered exactly how they should take those words.

As they did, Marie grinned and added, “So you’ll all be accompanying me on a little training exercise, okay?”

Chapter 5:
Rodman Does Have My Sympathies

"**G**FFH!"

After being called to the flagship, Emma and Russell's platoon were brought to a training room for some reason. The knights-only space had a ring in the center for practice matches between knights, as well as all sorts of other specialized equipment. It was fully stocked for any training a knight might want to do, since this ship was commanded by a knight.

Emma and Russell's squad now found themselves in that ring, facing off against Marie. It was four against one, but Marie dominated the match from the very moment it began.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me that's all you *elites* can muster." She grabbed Russell's spiky hair and threw him to the floor of the ring; Jorm was already passed out there.

Knights assigned to the flagship stood around the ring jeering and heckling them.

"Get 'em, Marie!"

"Come on! You can put up a better fight than that, rookies!"

"Damn it! I shouldn't've bet on the rookies hopin' to win big!"

Emma had no time to pay the rowdy crowd any attention. *There are four of us! And we're armed too!*

The four rookies carried training weapons called "shock swords" that dealt a small jolt when they landed but couldn't fatally wound someone. Marie, on the other hand, was fighting the four completely unarmed. After throwing Russell, she raised her hand, palm up, and beckoned Emma and Char forward. It was a provocation.

"You condescending little...!" Char took the bait, lunging at Marie with two sixty-centimeter shock swords in her hands.

Emma was shocked. *She's fast! And good at hand-to-hand too!*

Char managed to push Marie to the edge of the ring. She certainly seemed to deserve her reputation as a genius. She swung

her two swords fluidly with no wasted movement, trying to overwhelm Marie with a fierce onslaught of attacks.

She is *a real genius*… As she watched Char, Emma really felt the discrepancy in their skill levels.

Yet Marie avoided every single one of Char's attacks. "Well, I can have a bit more fun with you than the last two."

"Screw you!"

"Watch your language, dear."

None of Char's attacks were landing, although at first she'd seemingly been cornering Marie. No—Marie was just toying with Char. Watching Marie's expression, Emma realized that she was waiting for Char to give her an opening.

"Wait! Don't get so close!"

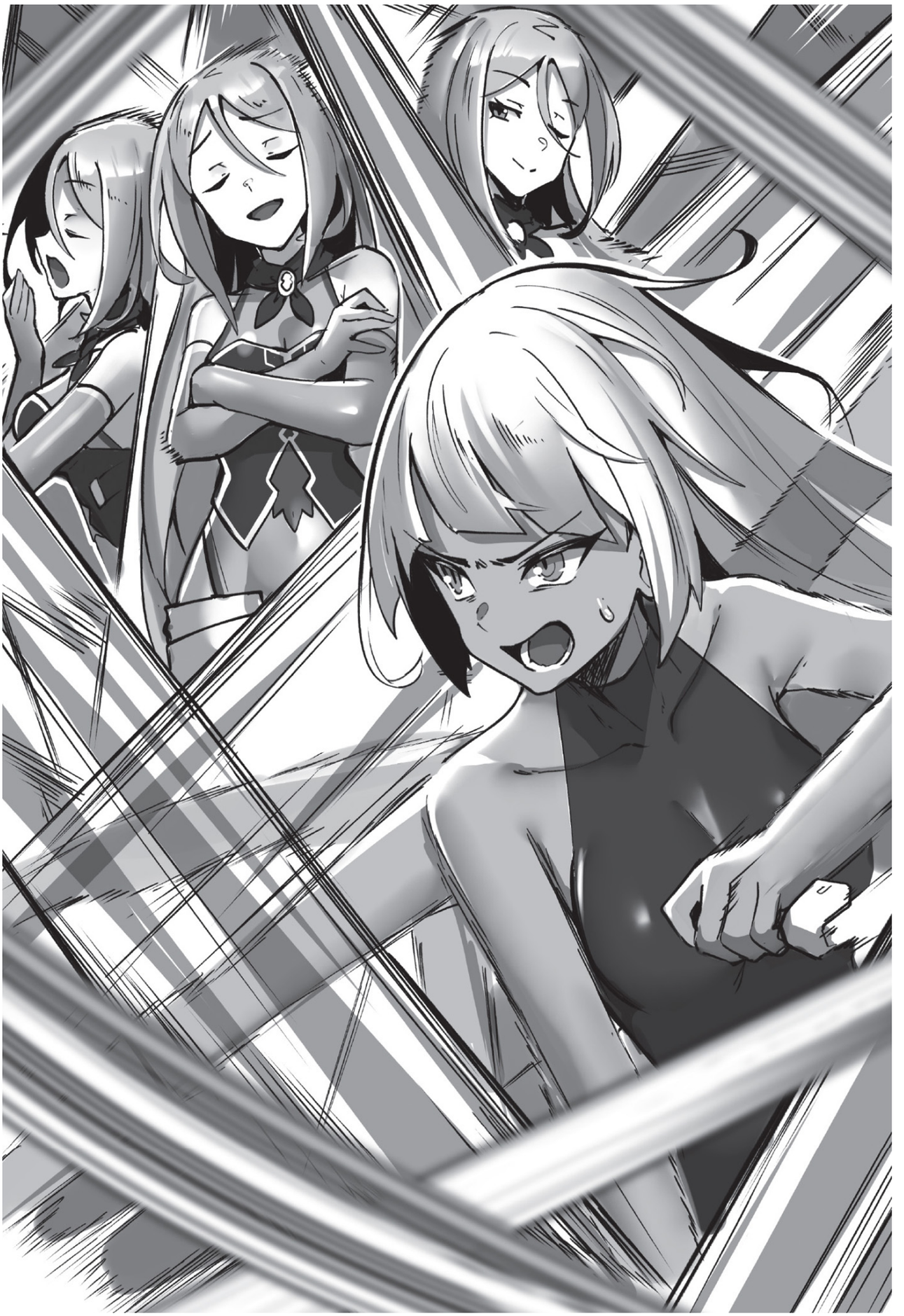
By the time Emma called out her warning, it was too late. Char rushed forward carelessly, and Marie grabbed the back of her head and threw her against the ground.

Char rolled when she hit the floor, then sprang back up, wiping her mouth. "I can't believe there's such a huge difference between us," she said, stunned.

Marie assumed an exaggeratedly disappointed expression. "This is all the rumored genius amounts to, hmm?"

That blatant provocation obviously irritated Char. "What? Piloting a mobile knight is my specialty. If that's what we were doing, I'd win!"

"No, you wouldn't. You couldn't beat me in a mobile knight either."



Char scowled at the assertion.

“You’re clever, so you game the system,” Marie continued. “Every time you go into the field, you take down five enemies, then just play it by ear. Why not aim a little higher, hmm?”

Char scoffed. It likely wasn’t the first time she’d heard that, but she seemed to have no intention of changing her behavior. “It’s a waste. It’s not like I’ll be paid more for working harder.”

House Banfield awarded pilots a bonus for taking down five craft piloted by enemy knights. Charmel was after that bonus, so in her mind, it was pointless to take down more than five craft. Thus, she didn’t bother.

Marie snickered. “Why not try for twenty? You’ll get a bigger bonus and a medal too.”

“Twenty? That’d be a little…”

If a soldier managed to take down twenty enemy craft in one battle, House Banfield awarded them a medal. These were enemy craft piloted by knights, so that was an extremely difficult achievement. It came with a hefty bonus as well, so if Char was after extra pay, she should try for it. However, she seemed to think it was impossible.

Marie gave Char a cold look. “That’s why you’ll never be more than just clever. Geniuses like you are a dime a dozen, but they hardly ever really amount to anything. Nor will you.”

Many people initially lauded as geniuses failed to make anything of themselves in the end.

“I’ll beat you and prove—”

Before Char could even finish the sentence, Marie rushed her and virtually buried her fist in the girl, knocking Char out before she even knew what had happened.

Looking down at the three unconscious members of Russell’s platoon, Marie sighed. “They didn’t even give me a good warmup.” She hadn’t sweated so much as a single drop.

Emma was shocked to see Marie deal with the three elites as if they were little more than children. She raised her shock sword, but she was trembling, certain she couldn’t win.

On her own now, Emma considered how to fight Marie. She just couldn't picture herself actually beating her. Marie just stood observing her, hands on her hips.

Well, if I don't do anything, I'll definitely lose. So…!

Emma rushed forward, slashing her shock sword in an upward diagonal direction. Thanks to her strengthened knight's physique, dodging an attack from her would have been incredibly difficult for a normal person.

Yet Marie just took a step back with a smile, avoiding the attack easily. "Too shallow."

"Huh?!" *She avoided it?! And by the skin of her teeth!*

The shock sword had been a hair's breadth from touching Marie. Emma couldn't believe the precision with which her foe had dodged the attack.

And now, in Emma's moment of astonishment, Marie drove her fist into the girl's stomach.

"Ghack!"

The blow drove all the air from Emma's lungs; for a moment, she felt worried that some of her organs would go with it. She flew through the air, then rolled along the floor.

I could see her attack, but I couldn't do a thing to avoid it…

When she stopped rolling, she heard the crowd's voices.

"That it?"

"You expected more from these pups?"

"Only that dual sword wielder had any promise."

Everyone was certain that the match was over, but Emma somehow stood up, enduring the pain in her stomach. "I-I'm not done yet…"

Her legs were trembling, and she could barely stand, but Marie gave her a surprised look before smiling. "I see you've got some backbone. I like that."

As soon as she was done speaking, she was at Emma's side.

"Huh?"

By the time Emma noticed Marie's presence, all she could see was the ceiling. She blacked out just like that, without even figuring out what Marie had done.

***

As Marie looked down at the four collapsed knights in the ring, Haydi walked up to her.

"Aw... The elites didn't last an instant, eh? Did you enjoy snapping their youthful pride in two or what? You're a total bully commander now, Marie."

He didn't seem to agree with the way she did things.

Haydi peered down at Char. "Looks like she's the only one we can expect much from. The rest all seemed thoroughly average, for better or worse. I guess that's thanks to who trained them."

The onlookers dispersed, focusing on their own training. They had no more interest in the young knights. Marie, however, stared down at the unconscious Emma.

"Haydi, have the others treated and sent back to their mothership. Leave this one, though."

Haydi was surprised to hear that order. After all, Marie hadn't asked him to leave Char behind. "You don't want the little genius?" If Marie was going to keep one of the knights, he would've thought that it would be Char—but she was looking at Emma.

"No, I don't."

Haydi lowered his gaze to Emma, then sighed and scratched his head. "You go for the average type, eh, Marie? Well, whatever. Bad luck for her that you took a liking to her, I suppose."

At that comment, Marie gave Haydi a sharp smile. "I was just hoping to get a little exercise, Haydi. So spar with me, would you?"

"Huh? Me?!"

***

Russell's squad had made it back to the Melea, but Emma wasn't with them.

In the hangar, the trio discussed Marie.

"How dare she say that crap about me…?"

Even after Char returned to the Melea, her mood didn't improve. She couldn't forgive Marie for wiping the floor with her and, on top of that, saying that she'd never amount to anything. But her irritation just proved that the commander's words had hit home.

Jorm attempted to console Char, telling her that she couldn't have done anything against such an opponent. "She's not AAA-rank for show, that's for sure. We were just no match for her. She took the captain out in an instant too."

Jorm glanced at Russell, whose eyes were closed. The way he sat there with his arms crossed, trembling slightly, made it look as though he was ashamed that he'd stood no chance against Marie.

"Captain?" Jorm said, concerned, since he'd never seen Russell this way. "I understand your frustration, but that fight was a mismatch. No need to dwell on—"

"I'm inspired!" Russell exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air.

When he did, Jorm and Char were baffled. "Huh?"

Ignoring the two, Russell described exactly how he felt, gesturing wildly to get the point across. "I never thought we'd have an opportunity to be trained by Lady Marie, who was once known as House Banfield's Wings! My only regret is that it just lasted an instant! I don't know whether there'll be a next time or not, but I want to get stronger just in case that day comes! No—I *must* get stronger!"

Jorm and Char exchanged glances.

"'House Banfield's Wings'? Have you ever heard that? I haven't."

"Nope. But the captain's a total House Banfield geek, right? He seems like he'd know everyone's less-popular nicknames and stuff like that… It's kind of cringey, to be honest. And he'd be perfect if

not for that…" Apparently, mere loyalty wasn't the only thing Russell felt for House Banfield.

Emma's Third Platoon stood a slight distance away, listening to the trio's boisterous conversation.

Doug sighed. "They called us all the way out here just to tell us they're taking the kid, and she's not coming back? What are the higher-ups thinking?"

Emma was supposed to come as a set with the Atalanta; what was the point of having them on different ships? While Doug's primary purpose in raising this question was to bad-mouth his superiors, his point was a valid one.

"The commander's a knight, so she can do whatever she wants, huh?" Larry said, piling on more complaints. "Not very smart for how great they're all supposed to be."

As the pair complained about their superiors, only Molly felt any concern for Emma. "Why would they keep just her, though? Do you think she's getting punished really severely or something?"

She was worried that Emma was being forced to take responsibility for the Melea's half-hearted participation in the battle.

Larry shrugged. "That'd be ridiculous. It was the colonel who gave the order to limit ourselves to support. Why would they punish some random lieutenant instead? They can't be *that* stupid."

"Are you sure she's not getting in trouble because you and Doug are so unmotivated?" Molly snapped.

Larry had been trying to reassure her, but his words had backfired; now, he wasn't sure what to do. He seemed to feel a bit guilty, since he knew he wasn't exactly cooperative when it came to Emma. "N-no way! Pr-probably not…"

Doug sighed again. "If something we did raised hackles, then the colonel would take the blame. So they probably kept the kid for some different reason."

Molly pursed her lips. "Still, I don't think it makes any sense that they wanted Emma and no one else."

Russell must've heard their conversation. He butted in, displeasure obvious on his face. "I suppose that if a commander's carefree, her subordinates will be carefree too."

Larry glared at the knight. “Didn’t think you elites would be interested enough in our conversation to eavesdrop.”

As Larry began picking a fight with Russell, both Doug and Molly reacted with exasperation and worry. There was no way a common soldier could measure up to a knight in a fight, let alone a knight of House Banfield, which treated knights particularly well even by the Empire’s standards.

Luckily, Russell had no intention of taking Larry’s bait. All he did was stare coldly at Larry. “Rodman does have my sympathies. After all, she ended up with a rotten lot like you all under her.”

“What was that?” Larry growled.

“Maybe you should reflect on your own behavior before picking a fight.”

With that, Russell took his platoon and left the hangar.

Chapter 6:
A Style

"H AAAH...HAAAH..."

Emma's heart was pounding so hard that she feared it would burst. However hard she panted, she couldn't get enough oxygen; it was agonizing. Her entire body was slick with sweat. Her muscles and bones screamed that they were at their limit.

She stood in a defensive position with both hands raised, wearing a special suit.

"Are you maxed out?"

Dressed in training wear, Emma was in the ring again, facing off against Marie. The senior knight wore protective gloves, but otherwise her clothing was light and thin. That was the complete opposite of the special protective suit Emma had on, which was heavily padded for shock absorption. It almost looked like Marie was going up against a human-shaped sandbag. Emma *did* have a way to fight back, though—a shock sword clenched in one hand. The various other weapons she'd tried lay scattered around her.

I'm not getting enough oxygen. *I can hardly focus anymore*...

Her special suit was the only reason she was still standing after Marie's onslaught. It absorbed the force of her enemy's blows so she didn't go down in one hit like she had during their first fight. Just in terms of their equipment, Emma should've had an overwhelming advantage over Marie.

Yet—although she was taking hits that weren't knocking her out—Emma was having trouble breathing, and her suit was so heavy that she couldn't move the way she wanted to. She'd been trained as a knight, but facing Marie was still incredibly difficult. At her absolute limit, Emma was barely mobile; meanwhile, Marie threw out guidance along with her punches and kicks.

"Set aside any notion of fighting in a particular way. You have to find a style that suits you. You'll remain a baby chick forever if you never break out of that shell!"

Marie's kick slammed into Emma's stomach, sending the younger knight flying to the edge of the ring. When Emma collapsed and stopped moving, Marie sighed, wiping away the small beads of sweat on her skin.

"If you want to be strong, forget everything you learned about fighting at the knight academy. It doesn't suit you, pilot of the Atalanta."

Finally awarded a break, Emma concentrated on breathing in as much oxygen as she could. "B-but we learned all different weapon styles at the academy…" she told Marie. "And we were supposed to pick the one we…"

Before Emma could tell her that she'd already settled on a weapon, Marie sighed. "That's a drawback of short-term learning. It's fine for knights who fit a mold, but it's stifling for those who think outside the box."

Marie was complaining, not to Emma, but to someone who wasn't there—someone who'd been put in charge of new knights' education.

She grabbed Emma and hauled her to her feet, announcing that their training had resumed. "I'll push you until you discover your own style… Hopefully, you find it before you break."

Emma shuddered at Marie's sadistic grin. Her body was already at its limit, and her mind was getting close. Part of her—a significant part—wanted to run away as fast as she could. But…

"Haaah…haaah…"

Tossing away her shock sword, Emma picked up a lance-type weapon instead. The idea was to keep Marie from getting close to her.

I want to run…but I want to find my own style too. I want to get stronger!

She wished to become a better knight, and she felt like she could surpass her old self if she kept up this training with Marie. If she overcame this…maybe she'd be one step closer to the person she admired.

Seeing Emma persevere, Marie grinned. That expression couldn't be called "refined," but it made her good mood rather

obvious. “I’ll give you full points for pluck.”

Although Emma attempted to hold Marie back with the lance, the other knight immediately closed the distance between them. She lifted Emma and slammed her to the floor of the ring.

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As Emma came to, she didn’t remember when she’d blacked out. It wasn’t her first time in that state, however, so she didn’t feel panicked. Since reporting to the flagship, she’d gotten used to being knocked unconscious.

Huh? she thought, hearing a racket nearby. *Wasn’t I in the middle of training?*

Looking around, Emma found that she was in a lounge for the ship’s knights. It was actually more a bar than a lounge, really. Various types of alcohol rested behind a long counter, and knights sat at tables here and there—drinking, chatting, and even fighting.

It was much rowdier and more violent than the bar she remembered once picking her father up from when she was younger. The riotous crowd didn’t quite align with the room’s high-class atmosphere.

While Emma was speechless with surprise, Haydi noticed her and walked over. “You awake, pilot of the Atalanta?”

“Huh? Oh, yes.”

Seeing how confused Emma was, Haydi filled her in. “Marie brought you here after you passed out.”

“The commander?” She looked around, trying to find Marie, and spotted her at the counter. Marie was drinking some expensive-looking alcohol straight out of the bottle; the sight took Emma a bit aback.

Marie noticed her and set down the now-empty bottle, picking up another one and coming over. “You’re awake. How about a drink?”

When Marie handed her the bottle, Emma shook her head, flustered. “S-s-s-sorry. I’ve never tried it before.”

“Oh? Young people these days really are well-behaved. My rowdy forces could learn something from you.”

The knights around her all burst out laughing at that.

“Marie wants us to behave, eh?!”

“That’s rich, coming from her!”

“You a comedian now, Sis?!”

Seeing how rudely Marie’s subordinates acted toward her, Emma broke into a cold sweat. Marie was one of House Banfield’s highest-ranked knights. Emma couldn’t even imagine being rude to her, but her subordinates treated her like she was just another coworker.

That was when a question occurred to Emma. *Is the commander the type who isn’t concerned with rank?*

Just as Emma was thinking that the two of them might be the same type of person, Marie turned around and asked her men, “Do you want to die?” with a sunny smile.

The crowd quickly settled down.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Whoops! Pissed her off.”

“Whew. That was a good laugh.”

Everyone was still cheerful, though. Emma had thought at first that Marie was intimidating them into silence, but the other knights’ smiles didn’t drop for a second.



She's not the same as me by any stretch. Her subordinates like her. There's real trust between them all. They obviously respected Marie, not just as their superior, but as a knight—and as a person too. *They're nothing like my squad… She's nothing like me.*

And presiding over the number of subordinates Marie had would be much more challenging. Emma only commanded three people, and she couldn't even manage that many properly.

Haydi noticed her sulking. "What's wrong, pilot of the Atalanta?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. I…I was just a little surprised that things are so different here than they are within my platoon."

Haydi grinned wryly. "Yeah. Given how well-behaved you are, I bet things with them *are* different than with these guys."

"No, that's not what I meant… I mean that I don't lead my squad well…"

When Emma told Haydi that she didn't feel adequate as a platoon leader, he turned to look at Marie, who sat in a nearby chair. She'd been listening with apparent interest.

"The Melea used to belong to a border region security force, right?" she asked.

When she did, the knights around them appeared to notice something. They all kept drinking, but they seemed to be listening in on the conversation as well.

"So, pilot of the Atalanta, what is it that you want to get your squad to do?" Marie asked Emma.

Emma thought about that for a moment, then described her ideal platoon to Marie. "Well…I wouldn't say I want it to be *normal*, exactly, but I'd at least like us to work together well as a team. My squad mates have had their spirits broken, but they used to fight putting their lives on the line."

If they were nothing more than regular delinquent soldiers, maybe she could just have left them alone. Now that Emma knew how hard the Melea's crew had fought to defend House Banfield in the past, though, she couldn't stomach them ending up dismissed from the army. That was why she wanted things to change.

Yet Marie shot down her hopes without even a moment's delay. "Not happening. The members of that crew aren't going to change."

"Huh? B-but…"

Before Emma could respond fully, Marie went on, "'They used to work hard' doesn't mean anything. I won't dismiss what they did in the past, but it's not cause to get your hopes up for the present or future." Even acknowledging the work the crew had done, there was no future for the Melea as things stood.

Hanging her head, Emma asked, "What would you do with the current Melea, Commander?"

"After this mission, you mean?"

Emma nodded.

"Split up the crew and dismiss most of them," Marie responded without even thinking about the question.

That was exactly what Emma had expected. She went pale.

Seeing the young knight's expression turn even more grave, Marie sighed. "But that's a problem for the Melea itself to deal with. If you still want to improve things—if you seriously want to solve this problem—take control of the ship yourself."

Emma shook her head. "Th-that's impossible! I may be a knight, but I'm only a lieutenant! I don't have the rank to command a ship!"

Marie gave her a teasing look. "True. But House Banfield values your knight rank highly too. Let's see… If you make it to captain, I bet you could muscle that colonel out of his position."

When House Banfield assigned command positions, it took candidates' knight ranks into consideration, so at times lieutenant colonels who were also knights ended up bossing around regular military colonels. In a domain that closely followed Imperial tradition, like House Banfield, knights had very high status.

"B-but someone like me couldn't just take over the Melea…"

Emma had heard of lower-ranked knights commanding higher-ranked soldiers, but she hadn't expected to be told to do so herself, so she wasn't sure what to say.

“There are no set rules about that. It depends on the knight’s abilities,” Haydi added.

“Then it’s even more unlikely. My grades at the knight academy were terrible, and I only cause trouble out in the field.”

Emma’s irresolute, self-deprecating attitude was starting to annoy Marie. “Well, if you’re not going to command them, I’ll personally see that the Melea is broken up after this mission. It’ll be better for House Banfield to give the ship and Raccoons to people who will use them, won’t it?”

“I…!” Emma tried to object, but when she thought back to the battle they’d just fought, she couldn’t say anything anymore.

Haydi must’ve pitied Emma when he saw her hang her head in silence. “Is there any reason you have to feel bad about that?” he asked her. “From the research I’ve done, I don’t see why you need to defend those guys.”

Emma opened her mouth to do just that but stopped; she remembered what Marie had told her. *It’s true that they worked hard in the past, but what about now? The way they are at this point,* is *it right to defend them?* She couldn’t help feeling that abandoning them would actually be the correct choice.

Seeing her hesitation, Marie told her, “Regardless of what else happens, you’ll have to keep piloting the Atalanta. If that was *his* decision, we aren’t entitled to go against it. The Melea’s crew has nothing to do with that, though.”

As the eyes of those nearby questioned her, Emma considered her own feelings. Why did she feel like she had to defend the crew?

Maybe I just pity the people aboard the Melea.

Soldiers who’d once supported the old House Banfield had broken spirits now. They *were* in a horrible state at present, but it was a fact that they’d defended House Banfield’s home planet of Hydra for many long years. Emma wanted to repay them in some way by helping them.

“I still want the Melea’s crew to get back on their feet,” she said.

Haydi shrugged. “You’re a stubborn one, aren’t you? I think it’d be better for everyone if you just let them go,” he said teasingly.

Marie dropped her fist onto Haydi's head, and he sank to the floor as she sat next to Emma. "Well, if you want to reform them, things can't go on like they are now."

"They can't?" Emma asked timidly.

Marie sighed. "I think you've been doing pretty well. I'd give you full marks, even. Getting that new craft developed and even having the ship outfitted with new units for everyone… No matter what anyone else says, you've done a fantastic job so far."

"Eh heh heh…" Emma laughed bashfully.

When she saw that, Marie smiled wryly. "But what the Melea's crew needs right now isn't a kindhearted superior like you."

"Huh?"

Marie's expression hardened. "Right now, those guys are worse than half-assed. If you really wanted to fix them, you should've been harder on them. Get the whole crew to hate you as a common enemy, and they might actually have shaped up a little."

"B-but that's…" Emma swallowed her words before she could say that wasn't what she wanted. She was starting to realize how naive she was.

Marie caught on to that from the expression on Emma's face. "Makes sense, doesn't it? I'll bet you were nice to them, hoping they'd have a change of heart."

"Yes…"

"If you really want to change things on the Melea, you'll have to throw away your naivety. It isn't the same thing as kindness."

Marie's words stabbed Emma's heart like thorns. She clenched a fist, holding her hand to her chest. She realized now that every time she'd interacted with the Third Platoon, she'd been worried about them starting to dislike her. "Naivety and kindness are two different things…"

"I'd say so," Marie replied. "If you really want the best for them, it'd be better to be strict with them—even if they end up hating you for it."

Emma was silent for a few moments until Haydi changed the subject. "Anyway, there's something I wanted to ask you."

“Yes?” Emma cocked her head.

“Whose side are you on, anyway?” Haydi asked with complete seriousness. “I pretty much missed my chance to ask you, since Marie brought you here and all. It’s kind of important, though, so I wanted to know.”

Emma wasn’t quite sure what Haydi was asking. “Huh? Whose side?”

“Are you not really involved in that? You’re still kind of on the outskirts here… You’ve got to have some connections, though. Has any knight helped you out or anything?”

She mulled it over, and one person came to mind. “If that’s what you’re asking… Instructor Claudia, maybe? I got to my current rank on her recommendation.”

Claudia’s name caused a wave of hostility to go through the gathered knights.

“Claudia? Claudia Beltran?! She’s right at the top of Christiana’s faction! You’re on Christiana’s side?!”

“How dare you show your face here?!”

“I can’t believe you said that right to Marie’s face, you little asshole!”

Emma was shocked by the sudden change that came over the knights. Flustered, she stammered, “No, I, er…I don’t know what this faction stuff is about, really…”

As she broke into a cold sweat, one knight pointed at her. “Don’t think you’ll get out of here alive just by playing dumb!”

All of a sudden, Emma was worried that people were going to start drawing weapons—until Marie slammed the bottle she held down on the head of the knight who’d just pointed at Emma.

Whaaa—?! What’re you doing, Commander?! Emma screamed internally. Externally, she couldn’t make a sound.

The knight collapsed to the floor, covered in the contents of the bottle that had broken over his head.

Marie glared at the crowd. “You have a complaint about my guest? If you do, go ahead and step forward.”

The implied threat quieted the knights instantly. Unlike before, they now seemed to understand that making her angrier would be a bad idea, so they all settled down. None even joked around.

“No, ma’am.”

All the knights sat down like chastised schoolchildren. A bunch of ruffians loyal to a person they knew they had no chance of beating—that was how Marie’s knights came off to Emma.

Marie smiled at her. “We’ll treat you as unaffiliated for now. Don’t worry.”

“Er, okay.”

That was when Emma learned just how seriously factions were taken in the knight order she belonged to. She couldn’t help feeling as though she’d just seen the dark side of her organization.

Chapter 7:
Petrified and Blessed

EMMA AWOKE IN THE LOUNGE. All the knightswho'd been partying the night before were sleeping around her. Some were face down on tables, some sprawled out on a row of chairs, and some were passed out on the floor. Marie slumbered sitting in a chair, her head propped up on her hand.

"I guess I fell asleep..." Emma murmured.

She'd been made to accompany the knights as they drank, and she'd drifted off during the merrymaking. Marie's harsh training had utterly exhausted her, and though she hadn't had any alcohol, she almost felt like she'd gotten drunk on the atmosphere. She could blame her condition on that too.

Looking around, she wondered sluggishly what exactly she should do now. "What time is it shipboard...? Just before dawn? Should I go back to my room for now? I'm sure I'll just get called for training right away..."

As she considered her options, one of the knights passed out on the floor suddenly shot to his feet. She was fairly certain the other knights had called this large, muscular man "Carlo."

"N-no! I don't want to turn to stoooooone!"

Approaching Carlo to see what was wrong, Emma was shocked to see that the gruff-looking man's face was a mess of snot and tears. He was flinging nearby tables and chairs around as though he was terrified of something.

The noise started to wake some other knights up, but none were particularly concerned about Carlo's rampage.

"Not again," one muttered with nothing but exasperation in his voice. Some just looked angry that Carlo had interrupted their sleep, but a lot had looks of sympathy on their faces.

Some of the knights got up and tried to subdue him, but he fought them all off with his superior strength. Then, after Marie woke up, she approached Carlo herself, shoes clacking on the floor.

"Look out!" Emma cried, reaching out reflexively.

All of a sudden, however, Haydi was next to her. He grabbed her hand before she could do anything. “Just watch.”

“But—” *He’s so strong*…

With Haydi holding her arm, she couldn’t move. She had no choice but to do as she was told and just watch.

Marie grabbed Carlo by the head and slammed him down to the floor. Where did that slender body of hers keep all her strength? It would’ve been easy to understand if the man she’d thrown was a regular civilian. However, Carlo was unmistakably a knight himself—one whom several other knights had been unable to subdue, despite coming at him all at once—and Marie had taken him down with one hand.

“Whoa…” Emma murmured, impressed.

Marie released the hysterical Carlo and held him, clasping his face to her chest. In a gentle voice without any of the noble affectation she usually assumed when she spoke, she told him, “No need to be scared. There’s nothing to be afraid of. No one’s going to turn you to stone again.”

“Marie… I…I…” Carlo had regained his senses, but he still trembled with fear.

As tears fell down his face, Marie held him harder. “Mm-hmm… Go ahead and cry. Cry all you like. Wail and whimper. Marie Marian will hear it all. And I’ll be here to tell you there’s nothing to be scared of anymore.” She gently patted the sobbing Carlo’s head. She looked almost like a loving mother with her child.

As Emma watched the scene, awestruck, Haydi began to speak about their past. “Pilot of the Atalanta, do you know our story?”

“Huh? Er…no, not really…” She looked here and there awkwardly, leading Haydi to surmise that she didn’t know much.

“Well, it’s not really something to spread around. I guess that, at most, you’ve heard rumors? Might as well take the opportunity to tell you. Y’see, a real long time ago, this scumbag petrified us and kept us sane with a blessing.”

“Petrified? A blessing? Er…” The words “petrify” and “blessing” didn’t quite mesh in Emma’s mind.

Haydi smiled wryly and explained, “It was basically a curse. Our bodies turned to stone, but our minds were preserved perfectly inside them.”

“Huh? That *isn’t* a blessing?” *Their minds were preserved, but it was a curse?*

Haydi gave a pained grin at Emma’s simplistic response. “Well, I guess it is. But having your mind trapped in stone for two thousand years is pretty much hell. Being capable of going insane and not need to experience that would’ve been a lot easier.”

“Huh? Oh…”

Emma finally realized exactly how ill-natured the “blessing” they’d been given was. They were trapped in stone for two thousand years. No wonder Haydi called their blessing a “curse.” There was no way for Emma to understand what they’d suffered, but just imagining it made her shudder. She was speechless until Haydi smiled at her.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like we want your sympathy or anything. Just… It was rough enough that, when we were set free, even a tough guy like Carlo kind of broke. That’s why, when we remember being turned to stone, some of us tend to flip out like that…and Marie’s always the one who brings us back to reality.”

Emma and Haydi watched Marie hold Carlo, a gentle smile on her face. The lounge was dim, but she happened to be under one of the lights that was illuminated, and everyone’s eyes were gathered on her. Emma saw the trust in the faces of the knights looking at Marie. All those tough guys had acknowledged her as their leader, and their respect for Marie tugged Emma’s heartstrings.

They’re nothing like my squad… No. The problem is that Lady Marie is so different from me.

Emma’s subordinates didn’t possess a fraction of the trust that these men held for Marie. Marie’s normally caustic, violent self was likely her true nature, but this deeply caring side of her must have been just as true. Marie was a fantastic knight, with strength and kindness to spare. That was clear as day to Emma.

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The Dahlia Mercenaries had arrived at a planet under Union control. In the spaceport—a repurposed asteroid already mined for resources—Sirena met an individual accompanied by some guards to talk business. The woman she was meeting wore a suit, and her guards were armed soldiers.

That woman, Miguela, was affable toward Sirena. “I’m happy that you understand what we’re trying to do here…even if you come from that outdated Empire.”

Miguela seemed to have some opinions on the Algrand Empire, but Sirena couldn’t have cared less about that. Although Sirena had only delivered the goods River tasked her with, Miguela seemed to assume that she was affiliated with the Empire’s army, given the sender of those goods.

Her misunderstanding was only natural, and Sirena carried on regardless. “I’m just glad we can help you achieve independence,” she said with a smile, handing a suitcase over to Miguela. Inside were valuable rare materials—jewels with magical properties and bars of metals more valuable than silver and gold.

When Miguela saw them, she smiled greedily. “I really am grateful that you could deliver all this safely. It would certainly have been hard to keep such valuable items secure. You must be good.”

“I’m just a courier,” Sirena said, keeping her perfect smile up. “It wasn’t any trouble, really.”

Evidently charmed by Sirena’s confidence, Miguela extended an invitation to her. “What would you say to a personal contract between the two of us? We’re looking for any capable fighting strength we can get hold of now.”

After those rare metals, she was in the market for military strength she could use for her own ends.

That’s rich. I know you just want to throw us at something and use us up.

Sirena’s experience told her that accepting Miguela’s invitation would be dangerous. Still, she answered sincerely so that the other woman wouldn’t notice that Sirena had caught on to her intentions.

“Let’s discuss that at a later date. For now, we should prioritize the client’s request.”

“That was to attack a transport convoy, right? Unfortunately, we don’t really have any fighting power to spare right now.”

“We have several containers’ worth of those same rare metals… Would those be enough to secure your assistance?”

The soldiers guarding Miguela were wide-eyed with shock. They had likely never imagined receiving so much support from the Empire.

Miguela smiled. “That should do nicely. Fighting for independence is such an expensive affair. Those resources would help us go far.”

Their negotiations were proceeding amicably, though Sirena had no fondness whatsoever for the woman in front of her. *Playing the champion of the independence movement, eh? It’s laughable. Her type always ends up as dictators if they actually succeed in grabbing power.*

Many people had achieved independence from different intergalactic nations in the past, but their leaders often succumbed to the temptations of power and wound up becoming ruthless autocrats. Though Miguela claimed to hate the Empire, Sirena didn’t see her as any different from all those past dictators.

“Then you’ll join us in attacking the transport convoy?” Sirena asked her.

Miguela conferred with a man in a suit who obviously wasn’t one of the soldiers guarding her. He must’ve been something like her secretary or adjutant. When their conversation concluded, she turned back to Sirena and nodded.

“We will. If we manage to capture the transport vessels, however, we’ll be putting the supplies they’re carrying to good use ourselves.”

Sirena smiled on the outside, cursing the woman on the inside. “That will be just fine.” *So long as you don’t get too greedy and self-destruct,* she reflected. *If she seriously thinks she’ll survive in this universe…she’s delusional.*

Sirena didn’t see Miguela as capable enough to govern a planet herself. If she could be used, however, Sirena wouldn’t hesitate to do so.

You’ll do your best for us, I hope.

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Sirena returned to the Dahlias’ flagship, and in the spaceport’s VIP room, Miguela had a conversation with one of her subordinates.

Her subordinate looked nervous. “I never expected the Empire to help us so much.”

The Empire and the Union were like oil and water. It was difficult to believe the Empire would be so supportive of a planet attempting to become independent from the Union.

Miguela sighed. “I suppose they’re siding with the enemy of their enemy. Pretty brazen of them. And it’s really the second prince sending us this stuff.”

The aid had been sent anonymously, but Sirena had told her who her client was. The Empire’s Second Prince Linus—a man currently in a fierce battle for succession with Third Prince Cleo.

“Do you think he’ll seek some sort of compensation later?”

Whether it was part of the succession conflict, some other plot, or simply a whim of his, the second prince was supporting their plan to win independence from the Rustwarr Union. Miguela had no idea what his reasons were, and she didn’t particularly care to find out either. To her, this was nothing more than a foolish move on his part.

“We accepted their request to help out with this attack, but if they want something else later, we’ll have no reason to agree to it. I’m guessing this convoy is connected somehow to the faction they’re up against. They just want us to be the ones responsible for taking care of it.”

“You think they’re giving us all these resources just for that? I just can’t understand how Imperials think…”

“I feel the same way. But thanks to them, our plans for independence are likelier to succeed now.”

Several planets in the Rustwarr Union were currently fighting for independence simultaneously. Thanks to that, the Union Army had their hands full. The freedom fighters had occupied several long-range warp gates, severely limiting the army’s movements. To Miguela, the current conditions seemed perfect for her independence movement to gain ground. They could use this chance to split off successfully, and she could eventually establish her own intergalactic nation.

“For the time being, we’ll have to borrow the help of those filthy Imperial mercenaries. We need all the fighting strength we can get right now, after all.”

When he saw her face, her subordinate relaxed a little. “It’s a relief that it’s temporary. I wasn’t too happy about the idea of associating with them long term. I mean, they may call themselves mercenaries, but they’re really hardly different from space pirates.”

“They’ll act as mercenaries when there are wars to fight, but they’re just pirates at other times. It’s rather disgusting, but if we can use them for our purposes, then that’s what we should do.” Their conversation had reached a stopping point, so Miguela asked her subordinate, “How many forces can we spare for this fight anyway?”

Her subordinate checked their available firepower on a tablet. “We planned on using two thousand ships, but only fifteen hundred are ready to move at the moment.”

“Why are we five hundred ships short?” Miguela asked, irritated.

Her subordinate hastily explained. “Some people are concerned about our current stock of supplies. They won’t approve the use of any more ships.”

Miguela was disgusted with whoever had reduced their fighting power on those grounds. “Those military types are completely useless. We’re doing this to *obtain* such resources, aren’t we? I guess there’s no reason to be reckless at this point, though. That transport convoy is a few hundred ships at most, right?”

“Yes. We already looked into the scale of the fleet.”

“With these mercenaries, we’ll have a big advantage in numbers. And the convoy will be at a disadvantage protecting those massive transport vessels.”

The Dahlia Mercenaries were confident that they had an accurate account of the convoy’s route, and they would attack from an area that was practically in the backyard of Miguela’s forces.

Miguela smirked. “Imperial nobles are just vain idiots, and I’m sure their military is just for show. Let’s make good use of those supplies they’re so kindly delivering to us.”

Her subordinate agreed with her evaluation. “They’d be no match for our army trained by the Union’s military.”

“Let’s teach those fools stuck in the past what a real war is like.” In Miguela’s eyes, they’d already won.

Her subordinate agreed that members of an old-fashioned system of nobility would be no match for them.

“Oh, and what about the enhanced soldiers?” Miguela added, as if she’d only just thought of the question.

Her subordinate checked the tablet and reported on the enhanced soldiers available. “They should already have been awakened from cold sleep. I think they’ll be ready in time to sortie with the rest of our fighters.”

When they didn’t have a mission to carry out, the Union Army’s enhanced soldiers spent their time in cold sleep. They were technically enlistees, so once their contracts were up, they could retire from service if they wished to. While they were in the Army, however, they were treated almost like tools. Naturally, any time when they weren’t in use and were kept in cold sleep didn’t count toward their term of service. That was how they were roped into the military for extended stretches of time.

Miguela was a bit worried about the enhanced soldiers. “They’ll obey us after waking up, right?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. Their commander is on our side, and they have no way to know much about current events, since they spend all their time sleeping. All they do is go out onto the battlefield and fight as they’re told to.”

Their lives were rather pitiable, but Miguela only smiled at that information. “Let’s use up as many as we can, then. The world has no need for such fearsome creatures.”

Enhanced soldiers, whose abilities were vastly superior to regular people’s, were treated as objects of fear in the Union. Most of the ones who managed to return to society after their service were ostracized. Having nowhere else to go, they usually either returned to the military or became space pirates or mercenaries due to a lack of alternatives. The sheer number of former enhanced soldiers who turned to such unsavory careers only gave them a worse reputation, exacerbating the problem. Miguela was among those with a negative perception of enhanced soldiers.

“Is that new craft we received from the Union Army ready?” she asked.

Her subordinate consulted the tablet once more. “There have been no problems. And we awakened a particularly talented enhanced soldier recently to pilot the craft.”

“Talented? I thought they were all the same. Some are more skillful than others?”

As Miguela’s subordinate showed her the info on the enhanced soldier in question, several holograms appeared around her.

“This particular individual has fought in a triple-digit number of battles and boasts a kill count among the best in the Union Army,” her subordinate explained. “They’re an ace pilot, if you will.”

Even after hearing that, Miguela didn’t have much to say. “Are you sure everyone else isn’t just falling behind? Well, whatever. Someone’s got to pilot that new craft. We’ll need to see whether it’s of any use in a real battle.”

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Capsules resembling coffins were lined up in a large, dimly lit room. Anyone who didn’t know better would likely think this was a morgue or graveyard. But inside the capsules were living people.

The lid slid off one capsule, and the woman sleeping inside gradually awoke and stared down at her hand. After opening and closing her fist a few times, she finally realized that she'd been roused from cold sleep.

Damn… Awake again.

As she woke up, she realized once more that she was still alive. Enhanced soldiers were used like tools, then thrown into cold sleep as soon as they finished their tasks. They were transported in cold sleep as well; sometimes, if they were unlucky, their ships were attacked, and they were killed before they could even awaken. Each time any enhanced soldier went into cold sleep, there was no guarantee that they'd wake up again. The woman had feared dying like that in the past, but after doing this so many times, she'd become numb to it.

I wish I could've stayed asleep…

In fact, at this point, she didn't even want to wake up again after going to sleep. She knew that when she awakened, the only thing she had to look forward to was being thrown onto the battlefield and used like a disposable weapon. And once she was done fighting, it was back to cold sleep for her.

She was never told what sort of circumstances the Union was in at any point, so she had no idea anymore what she was even fighting for. She'd joined the Union Army to live, and had resolved to become an enhanced soldier for the prestige and wealth her service would provide her…or, at least, that was the reason her superior told her she'd signed up for. Enhanced soldiers had their memories erased, so there was no way for them to know for sure why they'd chosen this path for themselves.

The past me really was an idiot, wasn't she?



At this point, the woman’s sole desire was to escape this never-ending nightmare.

All around her, other pods were opening, and enhanced soldiers just like her were awakening as well.

The woman stood up slowly. She was taller than average, with well-defined muscles, but her skin was so pale that she almost appeared sickly. Her blue hair was cut short, and her eyes were a lighter shade of the same color.

“I hope there’ll be someone who can shoot me down this time,” the cadaverous woman murmured to herself.

Chapter 8:
Selfish

WEARING HER SPECIAL protective suit and using a dual gun fighting style, Emma sparred against Marie. The guns she wielded would only deliver a slight shock if she hit an opponent. Still, with a ranged weapon, she should have a sizable advantage. If she managed to make her opponent freeze for a moment, she could simply pile on the hurt. And yet…

"I can't hit her!"

Emma was firing her guns rapidly, but Marie dodged every single bullet with minimal movement and casually walked up to her. Emma backed up until she was in the corner of the ring and shot until her guns ran out of energy. When they stopped firing and simply clicked fruitlessly when she pulled the triggers, she tossed them away.

"Crap! Then…" She reached behind her and pulled two short shock swords from her back, imitating Char, the genius who'd put up a good fight against Marie previously.

I have no talent, so I need to compete by attacking a lot!

Having given up on her own abilities, Emma had abandoned any thought of winning gracefully. She threw away the techniques she'd learned at the academy, determined to beat the person before her in whatever unsightly way she could.

She swung her swords inward, attempting to catch Marie between them, but her opponent easily anticipated the move and avoided it. Marie then leaped up and swung her foot down on Emma's head, which sent Emma flying. Though her suit absorbed its impact, the blow still hurt quite a bit.

Emma couldn't stand; she was still reeling from the kick that had surpassed her suit's defensive abilities. Her vision warped, and she felt sick. "I'm… I'm not…"

Seeing Emma still trying to stand back up, Marie smiled happily at her and praised her earlier fighting. "You're doing much better than before."

Indeed, having tried all kinds of weapons, Emma was finally close to finding one that suited her.

But Marie had more than compliments for her. “Your timing when you switch weapons could use work, though. At least keep your remaining ammo in mind at all times. You were too slow in switching to your shock swords.”

Taking the hand Marie held out to her, Emma stood. “I’ll be more careful.”

As Emma wobbled on her feet, Marie sighed. “The problem is that the moment you have two different weapons in your hands, you suddenly slow down.”

Marie was thinking seriously about Emma’s combat style. Why would she go so far for Emma? The young knight just couldn’t understand it. *She’s so much busier than I am… Why spend all this time on me?*

At first, she’d just thought that the commander was using her to relieve some stress, but Marie was spending far too much time on in-person training for that to be it. The more senior knight was busy commanding a whole convoy, yet she was cutting into her precious free time to train Emma.

Moreover, Emma wasn’t even a member of Marie’s faction. She was probably closer to being in Christiana’s faction, if anything, since at the moment she still felt she owed her old instructor Claudia more. On the other hand, Marie’s significance to House Banfield extended beyond her simply leading a faction of their knights. She had personally fought at their lord’s side—she was that important to the domain as a whole.

Even in terms of rank, Marie was a lieutenant general, so why was she training a mere lieutenant like Emma? Emma couldn’t understand why Marie was so earnest about it.

“Um, how come you’re helping me train so much anyway, ma’am?”

At Emma’s blunt question, Marie stopped thinking to herself, looking at the girl instead. She normally seemed very much the mature woman, but now she smiled innocently, like a child.

“Because you’re a knight *he* has his eye on… And because I’ve taken a liking to you myself.”

“Me? Isn’t Lieutenant Odent more talented than I am, though?” She thought Marie training Char would make more sense.

“No one said anything about talent,” Marie told her, sighing. “I’m free to like whomever I want, aren’t I? Besides, I hardly see that girl as a genius.”

Emma was surprised to hear that. To her, Char was more than talented enough to be called a genius. “Huh? But she has that impressive kill count, doesn’t she? I think she’s a lot stronger and more talented than me.”

Marie gave her an exasperated look. “Plenty of people are called geniuses, but not all of them actually end up producing results. Only the ones who leave behind true achievements should really be referred to geniuses.”

Emma understood what Marie was saying, yet she still didn’t quite agree. “But hasn’t Lieutenant Odent achieved more than I have? If she’s shot down twenty craft piloted by knights, she’s a real ace, isn’t she?”

Marie scratched her head at the self-deprecating way Emma spoke. After considering things for a moment, she decided to tell Emma exactly what she appreciated about her. “The reason I’ve taken a liking to you is that you’re well-suited to knighthood—because you’re selfish.”

“N-no, I’m not!” Emma immediately denied it. *Selfish?* That was pretty much the quality *least* suited to the ideal knight she aspired to be. No hero of justice was selfish. And as far as Emma was concerned, she comported herself more or less the way she thought she should.

However, Marie wasn’t budging on that point. “Yes, you are. When it would be better for both you and the Melea’s crew if you just abandoned them, you still stubbornly defend them. Sticking to your guns like that is nothing if not selfish.”

“Huh…?” After Marie said that, Emma had to reevaluate herself. *Was* she selfish?

Marie grinned at her. “It doesn’t seem like you’ve even realized it yourself. Instead of wasting away within a unit people are sent to for making a mistake, it’d be better for the Melea’s crew to quit the army and find new lives for themselves. After all, if they just joined new units, all they’d do is drag their comrades down with them, right?”

“But they all say they can’t live anywhere but within the military. They say there’s no way they could start new lives now!”

“They’re just scared of change. It’s fantastically selfish to want to keep them bound to the military regardless. Being a knight truly does suit you.”

Emma was speechless when Marie told her that she was only forcing her own ideals onto other people. But Marie wasn’t criticizing her selfishness; that was an aspect of Emma that she liked.

“Knights are only knights because they’re selfish. Well, assuming that they’re strong enough to actually *be* selfish about the way they do things.”

Emma couldn’t get on board with this radical idea Marie had about knights, but she did understand now that it *was* true of her. *I’m horribly selfish for never even considering what would be best for the people aboard the Melea. All I did was try to force my own ideals on them.*

She’d only realized that because Marie pointed it out. That fact was so shocking to Emma that her expression clouded. *I can’t call myself a knight of justice if I just insist that other people subscribe to my ideals*…

Emma had fallen silent, so Marie disregarded her and kept right on going. “I know the most selfish knight in the world. The most selfish, strongest, and noblest… The absolute ruler, Liam Sera Banfield.”

When Marie said that name, all the other knights hard at work in the training hall stopped. It was an important name to all of them too. It was the name of the person who’d saved them, the absolute ruler they pledged their loyalty to.

In the now-silent room, Emma argued, “Lord Liam’s a wonderful person! He’s not selfish! He rules with integrity and even fights on the front line himself! He’s a fantastic lord!”

He was a formidable knight, as well as a wise and just ruler. To Emma, he was basically the ideal person.

Hearing Emma’s impassioned defense of Liam, Marie grinned. “That’s some wonderful loyalty, but Lord Liam *is* a selfish person. On top of that, he has the strength to see his selfishness through. He’s publicly declared as much himself.”

Emma remembered what her former instructor Claudia had once told her: that Liam had called himself a villain. Now, Marie was telling her that he’d openly announced himself to be selfish. She was starting to lose sight of what exactly her ideal knight actually was.

“But…”

“It’s something Lord Liam’s always saying. That he developed his domain for his own sake. That he’s never spared a single thought for his subjects.”

Emma hung her head while Marie told her the truth about Liam.

“He’s been too wise for his years ever since he was young,” the woman continued. “So…he always understood that protecting his domain, ruling with integrity, and caring for his subjects were all just components of his own selfish ideal.”

“*Is* that selfish? Everyone shares that ideal, don’t they?”

“It is. After all, he’s decided that he can destroy space pirates if it’s for his subjects’ sake. If he were really just a saint, he’d try to spare both sides’ lives, wouldn’t he? Of course, I agree with Lord Liam’s thinking myself.”

Marie’s violet eyes seemed to give off a bewitching light. Those eyes didn’t contain a single doubt about her master. Seeing them, Emma hesitated. Despite Liam calling himself a selfish villain, Marie remained at his side so loyally. Did Emma possess that kind of loyalty herself?

“That’s why he calls himself evil…” she murmured.

“Right. I imagine that he measures good and evil on an unimaginably vast scale. He’d become a villain himself if that was what it took to balance those scales toward good… He truly is a noble person.”

Listening to Marie and thinking back on what Claudia had told her, Emma had a vague sense that she might be close to grasping who her ideal knight really was. They weren’t just a selfish villain, of course. After all, Liam stood up for his own people, didn’t he?

“The person I serve, who I look up to as my ideal… I never really knew anything about him, did I?”

As Emma’s tears began to fall in the ring, Marie told her gently, “You must admit that you’re selfish. And you must become strong enough to carry out your own will. Ability and *accountability* are what make a knight a knight.”

Emma couldn’t fully accept Marie’s unique viewpoint, but there was one thing she did understand. She raised her head and asked Marie, “Am I really selfish?”

“Yes, you’re an adorably selfish little knight,” Marie told her, smiling.

Emma accepted Marie’s answer, smiling through her tears. *Even if* he’s *selfish, he’s also nobler than anyone. So I should be as selfish a knight as I can. Selfishness is fine. I’ll become my own kind of ideal knight.*

“I want the strength to be selfish…to carry out my own will,” she pleaded to Marie.

Accepting her wish, Marie took a combat stance. “You should thank me, then. I’ll train you into a proper knight myself.”

***

While Emma was training on the flagship, the Melea’s crew—the Third Platoon included—lived slovenly lives as usual. In the hangar, essentially the same scene that had always played out before Emma left for the flagship was reoccurring. Molly stood alone with her maintenance tools in front of the Atalanta, fuming.

“You two are slacking off way too much just ’cause Emma’s not here! Did you forget that it’s our fault she got called over there in the first place?”

Larry, who sat on a container playing one of his gaming systems, acted annoyed by Molly’s lecture. “The higher-ups can lambast her all they want, but what’s the point of getting after her when she can’t even give orders on the Melea anyway? The people up top have no idea what actually goes on out in the field, just like always.”

“There you go shifting the blame again!” Molly sighed. “Meanwhile, Doug’s off drinking and won’t even come to the hangar. I keep telling him I want to recalibrate his machine, but he won’t listen! Emma’s hard work got us these units, and he’s wasting them!” She couldn’t bear the thought of Emma’s efforts being squandered.

Meanwhile, Larry was just annoyed that Molly was getting so emotional. “If one person’s hard work could get us new equipment, we wouldn’t be having such a hard time, would we?”

“Do you seriously think this would’ve happened without her? You think they’d just give us new equipment for no reason…?”

“Well…”

Their border region security force was supposed to be nothing more than a place where failures were sent to languish, wasn’t it? The army wasn’t good-natured enough to fix up their mothership and assign them cutting-edge Raccoons just on a whim, so Emma was unmistakably the catalyst for that change. Larry must’ve agreed that the crew would never have achieved that on their own; he’d fallen silent after Molly’s question.

Next to the Atalanta were the elite squad’s three mobile knights, presumably set up nearby because they were all customized Nemain units.

Their maintenance and calibration completely looked after, the custom Nemains stood by in perfect shape, ready to deploy. As for their pilots, all of them—even Char—were leading strictly scheduled lives aboard the ship. Molly didn’t exactly find the squad easy to get along with, but she had to admit that they were doing everything right…unlike her own squad.

“I wonder what Emma’s doing right now…”

Larry sighed at Molly’s worried comment. He might just have been annoyed with her, but it was equally likely that she’d made him feel guilty again. Putting away his gaming system, he headed for the cockpit of his craft to calibrate it.

“Larry?” Molly questioned him curiously.

Larry responded gruffly. “You want to calibrate this thing, right? Let’s get it over with already.”

Molly was thrilled that Larry was showing interest in something other than his games for once. “Okay! Then let’s look at all the settings we’ve ignored until now too, okay? It should only take five hours or so! Want to review all your weaponry while we’re at it?”

When he saw how enthusiastic Molly was over his own show of motivation, Larry started to regret it. “Five hours…? Give me a break…”

His cheek twitched.

***

Meanwhile, Russell’s platoon was making use of the Melea’s training room. Char in particular had been putting in extra effort after her pummeling by Marie.

“I’ll smack that woman one day!” she exclaimed.

Watching Char sweat as her thin arms lifted heavy barbells, Jorm smiled. “If it made you get serious about training, Char, I guess it was worth getting the crap kicked out of us.”

“Shut up!” As soon as she finished her set, Char rounded on Jorm. “Don’t forget that you were the first one to get knocked out! Don’t get full of yourself when you’re weaker than me. Or are you going to get your papa to come help you out?”

When Char brought his father up, Jorm scowled. “My father has nothing to do with this.”

“Yeah, he does. Your family’s served House Banfield as knights for ages, right? I know your father’s got an important position.”

Jorm's father was a knight of House Banfield as well—an important one too, just as Char claimed.

Now that Char had brought up his connection to his father, Jorm wasn't laughing anymore. "No one's served House Banfield for 'ages.' There are only second- or third-generation knights at most. Why don't you learn something about the organization you're in? Oh, right, you can't, 'cause you barely passed our academic classes."

While Char had impressive abilities as a knight, her grades in other areas had been rather poor. That was just by Jorm's standards, of course. Compared to the average knight, Char was more than capable. Still, Jorm pointing her weakness out like that started to rile Char up.

"Huh? Don't get full of yourself, you wannabe marksman. You're just a coward." She glared at Jorm.

He stared back sharply through the gap in his long bangs. "You wanna go?"

The two looked ready to pounce on one another at any moment when the voice of their captain, Russell, resounded through the training room. "I… I…I feel so pathetic! Why couldn't I have stayed…? I'm so envious of Lieutenant Rodman! If I'd been stronger, I'd be the one with Lady Marie right now! Aaaaaaaaaah!"

Russell was so overwhelmed with jealousy that Emma was back on the flagship, receiving training from Marie, that he'd started screaming like this when he worked out. It was his way of lighting a fire under his inadequate self.

Seeing Russell shout to himself as he worked out in the training room the three had to themselves, Char was able to regain her cool. "How long is he going to do that…? It really kills my motivation."

Jorm seemed to feel the same way. "He's been like this ever since we got back from the flagship. I get that he's disappointed, but seriously…"

No longer raring to fight, the pair cut their break short and got back to their training.

Chapter 9:
A Nuisance

THE MELEA WAS PART of the escort convoy, but daily life for the crew hadn't changed, even though they had a mission.

In the onboard bar, three old veterans sat around drinking together. One was Doug of the Third Platoon, and another was Colonel Baker. They'd known each other for a long time and didn't care about observing rank with one another.

Colonel Baker finished the drink in his glass and unbuttoned his shirt, relaxing a bit. "Being in a cobbled-together fleet like this is tiring. Annoying, all the super-serious guys you've got to deal with. They'll cuss you out just for being a little late on your scheduled check-ins." He looked exhausted.

Meanwhile, Doug smiled, already drunk. "Keep up the good work, Commander!"

"You guys have it made. Meanwhile, I've got to deal with all this grumbling and complaining from people I never normally talk to."

As Tim groused about his workload increasing, their other companion filled his glass sympathetically. She was a pilot—Warrant Officer Jessica Cortes, commander of the Sixth Platoon. Jessica wore an eyepatch over her left eye. After losing that eyeball in battle, she'd gotten an artificial one; she'd refused treatment to regrow her real eye, liking the artificial one better. Jessica had dark-purple hair that went down to her waist, and she was just as muscular as Doug. Doug and Tim had known her for a long time.

"Dealing with those outsiders who think they're oh-so-important must be hard," she mused.

The "outsiders" Jessica referred to were the Imperial Army officers whom House Banfield had welcomed into its private forces. They were real Imperial soldiers who'd joined House Banfield when it was restructuring its army. Those officers, and the knights House Banfield had managed to obtain, now formed the core of that private army. The knights had almost all been recruited from elsewhere as well. To Doug and other members of the old army,

they came off as nothing but outsiders acting like they now owned the place.

As Doug sipped from his glass, Jessica asked, “Doug, that kid in your squad got called to the flagship and hasn’t come back, right? Did she do something?” The “kid” was the knight assigned to the Melea—Emma.

Doug gave her a wry smile. “I don’t know many specifics myself, but by the sounds of things, she’s getting trained over there.”

“Why?”

“How should I know? All Molly told me was that some big-shot knight is training her.”

“Our three guests came back, though, right? You sure the kid didn’t screw up big time?”

“I don’t give a crap. Anyway, if they just assigned her to the flagship instead, that’d be better for her.” In Doug’s opinion, Emma shouldn’t need to languish aboard a dead end like the Melea.

“That’s a good idea,” Colonel Baker agreed. “Will you send the Atalanta over to them? It’d be a weight off my shoulders. They should take the Raccoons while they’re at it. Since we got those new machines, everybody’s started complaining when we hang back in battle.”

As far as he was concerned, some new mobile knights weren’t worth the trouble of fighting in the thick of things. If anything, the Raccoons actually worsened their chances of survival.

Jessica didn’t seem to agree, however. “I’m not going back to a Moheive now that I’m accustomed to the Raccoon.”

Colonel Baker sipped his drink. “Got used to luxury, eh? You say somethin’ to her, Doug.”

Doug laughed. “Sorry, but I agree with Jessica.”

As his two pilots ganged up on him, Colonel Baker downed the rest of his drink and swiped the bottle from Jessica, pouring himself another one.

“Even though you hardly ever calibrate the damn thing?” he grumbled.

The other two ignored the colonel, who was just drinking out of frustration now.

“Doug, you feel for the kid, don’t you?” Jessica asked him.

“Huh?” he grunted in response, playing dumb.

“I’m not calling you a traitor or anything, man. You’re free to think she should go somewhere better for her. Hell, I agree. If the kid sticks around with us, we’re all gonna end up space junk one day.”

If Emma’s presence was the reason the Melea’s crew was being sent into battle now, then she’d be the reason they eventually got shot down and turned into space junk. As far as Jessica was concerned, Emma’s presence wasn’t good for the young knight herself *or* the Melea. So she told Doug this:

“If you push her away, she’ll eventually give up on whatever she’s trying to do here and request to be transferred somewhere else. When she comes back, you’ve got to be hard on her. It’ll be for her sake too.”

Doug decided to do as Jessica suggested. “Yeah…all right.”

I know it’ll be for her sake, but acting cold to her to push her away? That’s pretty underhanded… Back in his army days, Doug had hated such methods, so he felt pathetic about agreeing to this so quickly now. *When did I get so damn rotten, anyway?*

Angry with himself, Doug swiped the bottle from Colonel Baker and refilled his glass, downing it in one gulp.

***

“Two swords and two guns didn’t work either. I need to think of something else. But it’s not just my weapons. Something else is missing too…”

After her training, Emma walked down the halls of the flagship, muttering to herself. Marie pushed her to her limits every day, and she was starting to hit a wall both mentally and physically. At this point she just wanted to quit, but she couldn’t give up on the idea of getting stronger.

“I need a better weapon… One that suits me more…”

Emma was barely on her feet, but the flagship’s crew didn’t pay her any mind when they passed by. They all knew Marie was training her.

When Emma finally ran out of strength and had to lean against a wall, a woman in a red business suit ran over to her.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Thank you,” Emma replied, trying to show the woman that she was fine. She was surprised to see someone who wasn’t wearing fatigues or work clothes. With a pained smile, she added, “I’m sorry. I’m just tired after some training.”

At those words, the woman lit up. “I heard that the lieutenant general had high hopes for a new knight. Would that happen to be you?”

In response, Emma could only keep up her pained smile. “She does have hopes for me, but I can’t seem to meet them. She beat the stuffing out of me again today, and I couldn’t land a single hit on her,” she said self-deprecatingly.

The woman still seemed interested. “Is that right? Well, I’ve seen lots of knights myself, and I think you have potential.”

“Er…”

“Oh, sorry,” she added, noticing Emma’s confusion. “I’m Patrice Newlands. I’m one of the Newlands Company’s leaders.”

“M-my apologies, ma’am!” When she realized that she was talking to the very person their convoy was tasked with defending, Emma hastily saluted.

“If you get ahead in life at some point, I hope you’ll remember Patrice Newlands,” the woman told her, using her tablet to send Emma her contact info.

Then she walked off with some guards, leaving Emma baffled at the fact that she’d just been conversing with one of the higher-ups at a top trading company. She didn’t think anyone would believe her if she told them that someone like Patrice had basically said that she expected Emma to make something of herself in the future. The woman did business with nobles and the Imperial Army, after all. If she was to pay attention to anyone, it’d be a reputable

ace pilot, or someone high up in some organization. At least, Emma had thought so.

"Miss Patrice…of the Newlands Company… She seemed so mature…"

After Emma's exhausting training, her brain wasn't working too well. Meeting Patrice had brought a face to mind that Emma didn't want to remember: that of the Dahlia Mercenaries' Sirena. The unwelcome reminder made her clench her fists.

"I won't lose to her again," Emma told herself. "I'll win next time. To do that, I need to get stronger…"

Although Emma was exhausted, when she remembered Sirena, she found that her strength gradually returned.

***

A few days later, Emma was back in the ring facing off against Marie. She was panting and out of breath, but across from her, Marie was as unruffled as ever. Still, one thing was different about her today. When Marie ran her thumb over her cheek, it came away with a bit of her own blood on it.

When she saw that, she smiled ferociously. "Good, pilot of the Atalanta… Not just any knight can land a hit on me. You should be proud."

Emma had her weapons in hand, desperate not to miss a single movement of Marie's. She watched the other woman carefully, eyes wide.

When Emma didn't respond, Marie sighed. "Guess you don't have the energy to talk. Too bad. But those eyes… You followed my movements, didn't you?"

Marie stepped into Emma's range and swung at her; Emma hastily avoided the blow. *I can follow them…but my body can't keep up!* She somehow managed to avoid Marie's fist and swung her weapon at her opponent, but Marie was already attacking again.

"So, you can observe them, but you can't move that fast yourself. Looks like you need more training!"

Emma saw Marie's knee approaching her gut, but she couldn't get away; the other knight had grabbed the back of her head.

"Ghack!" She spat out a glob of saliva, falling to the floor and rolling around the ring in pain.

Marie looked down at her with a smile. "Still, I'd say that's more than enough skill to call yourself an ace. Congratulations, pilot of the Atalanta. You pass!" After telling Emma that, she climbed down from the ring.

Watching Marie go, Emma held her stomach and choked out, "Th-thank you…ma'am…"

As soon as she spoke the words, she passed out.

***

Haydi and Carlo lifted the unconscious Emma from the ring.

"Never thought I'd see Marie give a kid a passing grade," Haydi said, impressed. "If this knight survives, she might just become someone big."

Carlo felt the same way. "It was impressive enough that she endured that much of Marie's training. I can't believe she actually got a hit in too. What's her name? Rodman? Why don't we recruit her for our unit?"

The other knights all thought highly of Emma too. Their eyes seemed to say that they'd acknowledged her as a worthy comrade.

Grinning wryly, Haydi looked down at Emma. "Aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves, guys? For now, let's just let her rest."

Chapter 10:
The Rebel Army

AS THE FLEET from the planet that had declaredindependence departed, its commander gave a speech to raise morale. *“We’re after that Imperial transport convoy. Do those outdated fools think they can just waltz through our backyard like they own it? We’ll crush them!”*

In the cockpit of a humanoid weapon, an enhanced soldier listened to the speech while calibrating the craft. “I wake up for the first time in decades, and we’re attacking a transport convoy? What are we now—space pirates?”

Another enhanced soldier in the area heard the comment. None of them had names, only numbers. When they became enhanced soldiers, their memories were erased, so they didn’t know anything about their pasts either. The soldiers had been told that their memories would be returned when they retired, so some were fighting in order to find out who they’d once been. This enhanced soldier was among them.

“Hey, Nathan. You’re in a bad mood, aren’t you?” the second enhanced soldier asked. “Nathan” was the call sign the first enhanced soldier’s comrades called her by.

“What do you want? We’re about to deploy, and I have to calibrate this new machine. Don’t talk to me.”

The humanoid weapon Nathan piloted—called a “mobile knight” in the Empire—was cutting edge, although who knew where the independence army had gotten it. The craft’s designation was SG-F04, and it had been given the name “Gladiator.” The Union Army tended to prefer simple, practical designs, but this craft was sleek, with large shoulders. The flexible boosters on those shoulders gave the craft a very distinctive silhouette and made it incredibly maneuverable.

The force’s mass-produced craft were all green, but since Nathan’s machine was unique, it was navy blue instead. Perhaps the color was supposed to distinguish it as a commander’s craft. It was something Nathan hadn’t seen before in the Union Army, in any case.

Just what had happened over the last few decades? Nathan found herself baffled by these aesthetic changes within the Union Army. Still, she had to admit that the craft was capable.

“Its specs are way better than those of the machine I piloted before…” she muttered as she calibrated the humanoid weapon. “Not bad.”

The other enhanced soldier gave her a look.

“What?” she asked, annoyed with him.

“I just wanted to ask about your call sign. Why ‘Nathan’?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Please!” the man begged. “I always forget to ask you, then remember right before we’re put into cold sleep again and kick myself. That kind of thing happens to you too, right?”

“Nope,” Nathan said bluntly.

Still, the man wouldn’t back down. “Come on. After the battle, we’ll just go back into cold sleep. Who knows whether I’ll get the chance to ask again, right?” Indeed, they had no idea whether they’d ever speak in the future.

Nathan caved to his persistence. “There’s no reason for that name. I just…get the feeling I was called that in the past.”

“You still have memories from then? That’s amazing! I’d kill for memories from before I became an enhanced soldier.”

“All I remember is someone saying my name. I don’t have any more memories than that.”

“I see…” The man smiled sadly. “Hey, if you survive, do you think you’ll remember me? I swear to remember you if I make it.”

“Like I could forget a weirdo like you,” Nathan responded with extreme annoyance.

The man grinned. “Thanks, Nathan! Now I can fight with no regrets.”

“Don’t jinx yourself.”

As the pair spoke, their current commander entered the hangar—a haughty individual who thought of enhanced soldiers as nothing but tools and yelled at them as if they were animals.

“Ready, you enhanced puppets? Hurry up and get in your craft!”

It was evidently time to sortie. The man headed for his own humanoid weapon, and Nathan closed her hatch.

***

On the bridge of the escort convoy’s flagship, Marie sat in the commander’s seat, a satisfied smile on her face.

“You’re in a good mood today,” Haydi observed, looking disturbed to see her so cheerful.

“Every once in a while, it’s not so bad raising the next generation. You should train a few of them yourself sometime, Haydi.”

Hearing the reason for Marie’s good mood, Haydi went wide-eyed. “Never thought I’d hear *you* express an interest in instructing.”

“It was just a whim. If anyone asked me to do it again, I’d say no.”

“So…you wouldn’t do it again, but you want *me* to?”

Marie laughed. “It’s just a hunch of mine, but I think you’d make a good instructor.”

“I wouldn’t think so. And I happen to like my current position. Plus, you need someone to clean up the messes you make, right?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Marie rolled her eyes.

The two needled one another, but there was clearly trust between them.

“Can I ask you something?” Haydi continued, since he’d caught her in a good mood. “Why’d you pick the Atalanta’s pilot over the genius girl? That was who I thought you’d want to train.”

“What? You think I made a mistake?”

“I just think the other girl had more potential for growth.”

It was true that Emma had gotten stronger, but if Marie had trained Char instead, the same thing would’ve happened to Char. In

fact, Haydi thought that Char would've improved more than Emma had.

"I know the pilot of the Atalanta has guts and good eyes, but I can't imagine those were your only reasons for training her."

Marie thought for a moment, then smiled. "The fact that I chose her isn't good enough for you?"

"No."

"What about *him* choosing her?"

"Now you're just trying to get out of answering. It wasn't just 'cause she's the pilot of that prototype, is it?"

Marie shrugged, giving up in the face of Haydi's tenaciousness. "It's simple. I chose her because…"

That was when the bridge crew noticed something.

"Is that debris…? No, there's too much of it. This is…"

Haydi picked up on the crew's concern. Before he could do anything, though, Marie stood and issued commands, going off her instincts. "It's the enemy. Take your first combat positions. Order the fleet to protect the Newlands Company's transport vessels. This one's going to be trouble…"

When Haydi heard that the enemy was upon them, he dropped his casual attitude right away. "These guys have bad timing… I'll get our forces deployed on the double."

"Good. The pilot of the Atalanta—is she still with us?"

"Yeah, but given this timing—"

Ignoring Haydi's reluctance, Marie commanded, "Send her back to the Melea on a small craft and have her sortie."

"Are you sure? She's probably exhausted…" Haydi wanted to hold off on deploying Emma.

Marie believed in her, however. "I didn't do such a lousy job training her that this would be enough to take her out."

Sensing that there was no changing Marie's mind, Haydi resolved to carry out her orders. "Got it."

Right when they finished talking, an operator alerted them to the enemy's approach. "Fleet of unknown origin traveling in this

direction. It’s not the Union Army!”

Marie’s lips curled into a grin. “There they are.”

***

Hearing an alert, Patrice rushed onto the bridge of one of the transport ships. Her hair and clothes were slightly disheveled, and she was showing more cleavage than she typically did.

“Another space pirate attack?!” she cried.

The vessel’s captain shook his head. He’d been flying for the Newlands Company for a long time, and Patrice placed a lot of trust in him. “Their equipment is too consistent. This seems to be the rebel army we’ve gotten wind of.”

“Rebel army?! What’re they doing here?! *I* never heard anything about the rebels having an army in the first place!” Why did an independence movement have an organized army?

As he answered her question, the captain threw in some of his own speculations. “Well, local garrisons would use soldiers from the area. So I’m sure they’re all trained soldiers, although they’ve probably just got old equipment the Union Army’s not using anymore. If they’re still well organized, they’ll be more trouble than space pirates.”

There were space pirates who’d once been soldiers as well, of course, but the more time they spent away from the army, the less of a threat they were. Armies only functioned with significant support behind them; as soon as they lost that support, they grew weaker and weaker at a rapid pace.

If the independence movement had only just started to take action, however, its forces were likely still fairly skilled soldiers. At the outset of their movement, they’d be motivated, and their morale was likely high as well.

Patrice looked at the monitor. To her, all the ships did seem to be of Union Army origin. Most looked like old models, but some were seemingly capital ships of a make currently used by the regular army.

“They have a lot of capital ships,” Patrice pointed out. “Oh…are those mercenaries?”

Some vessels stood out at the edge of the fleet of clearly affiliated ships. From experience, Patrice identified them as mercenary craft.

The captain had noticed them too. He wore a stern expression. “I’ve been watching those mercenaries, and they seem experienced. Alongside those army remnants, they’ll be trouble. I wonder why they were waiting here to ambush us too.”

Patrice ground her teeth. “The Union government vetted our route. They’ve really done it now!”

Since they were going to the Union to negotiate with the government, the other party had determined their path. The possibility of a traitor in their midst crossed Patrice’s mind.

She asked the captain outright whether they’d be able to make it through this. “Think our defenses will hold?”

“All I can say is that that depends on House Banfield’s ability. But in terms of numbers, we’re definitely at a disadvantage.”

Patrice was getting a headache. Now they had to deal with a rebel army trying to gain independence instead of just space pirates?

“We’ll just have to hope the knights tasked with protecting us can handle themselves,” she remarked.

In this situation, achieving victory would be extremely difficult for Patrice. She not only needed to ensure that she didn’t lose even one of her massive transport ships, but if they made it to their destination, she then also needed to negotiate successfully with the Union government.

Losing even one of her ships would spell her doom. If Marie Marian couldn’t get them all through this, Patrice would lose her standing in the Newlands Company even if she survived the battle.

All Patrice could do was watch the battle play out from the bridge, or so she thought before she received a message on her tablet.

“Who in the world is that at a time like this? Wait…that girl?”

The message was from Emma, whom Patrice had gone to get a look at after hearing that Marie had high hopes for a new knight. The message—despite the current emergency—was a product order.

“She wants a product delivered *now*? Is that girl an idiot or just useless?” Patrice griped over Emma’s untimely order. She was no longer nervous anymore, however. Instead, she was smiling. “Very well… Captain, I’ll need a courier to transport these items.”

The captain groaned. “In the middle of a battle?”

“It’s Newlands policy to deliver goods even in the middle of battle. We’ll charge a hefty fee for it, of course.”

***

In the hangar of the escort convoy’s flagship, Emma was boarding a small high-speed vessel. She wore a pilot suit provided by the flagship; it was purple rather than her usual suit’s color. Emma was more relaxed than usual; two handguns were strapped to her thighs.

Marie’s adjutant, Haydi, had come to see her off as she returned to her mothership. “Sorry, but we don’t have an extra mobile knight to spare,” he told her. “You’ll have to return in this.”

The compact high-speed craft was something like a fighter jet. Now that mobile knights had become the primary weapons on the battlefield, such craft weren’t often flown. Still, they came in handy for situations precisely like this, so they hadn’t passed out of use completely.

“Thank you for everything.” Emma saluted.

After blinking in surprise, Haydi returned the gesture bashfully. Emma guessed that Marie’s men didn’t salute very often.

“You look like a different person from when you first got here,” he told her. “I’ve got a message for you from Marie too. She says, ‘Pilot of the Atalanta, if you want to have your way, show me your worth.’” Then Haydi added sheepishly, “Well, do your best, but don’t push yourself *too* hard.”

“Yes, sir,” Emma replied, smiling. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Here’s some advice from me too. Changing yourself is easier than changing someone else. If you want to change things on the Melea, do you know what you have to do?”

Emma looked down for a moment. This was an answer she had to prepare herself to give. “Yes,” she said finally.

Haydi gave her a relieved look. “Good luck.”

He backed away from the craft, and Emma closed the hatch. Now alone in the cockpit, she thought about everything she’d learned aboard the flagship. Just as Haydi had said, her face looked a lot different now than it had when she’d first arrived.

“If I want to carry out my own justice…I need to be selfish.”

As soon as she got permission to launch, Emma gripped the control sticks and flew the craft into space.

***

As alarms blared aboard the Melea, Russell stood outside his cockpit, ready to enter battle. Enraged, he shouted at everyone around him. “What do you mean, ‘don’t deploy’?! We have orders from the flagship to sortie!”

He was angry because the Melea’s commander hadn’t granted him permission to do so. In fact, the mechanics had locked down Russell’s craft, so he couldn’t deploy even if he wanted to.

Russell’s authority should have been such that he could sortie with or without Colonel Baker’s permission. If he physically couldn’t launch his craft, however, his authority meant nothing. If he really wanted to deploy, he could’ve destroyed the hangar, but then he wouldn’t be able to return to the Melea after the battle.

The mechanics around him exchanged annoyed glances.

“Colonel Tim’s our boss. We don’t take orders from you.”

“You elites are so hotheaded. It’s a real pain.”

“You don’t even get that the colonel’s keeping you here out of the kindness of his heart.”

Russell went back to his cockpit, grinding his teeth. In her own cockpit, Char looked disgusted; Russell could see her through their communication line.

"Makes me want to ask the guys up top just why they stationed us here," she complained. *"Ugh. Guess I won't get my bonus this time around."*

Jorm was exasperated as well—and a bit angry to boot. *"Kindness, eh? Wish he'd realize that 'kindness' is just a pain in our asses."*

Russell's blood boiled in his cockpit, but he had to keep his cool in front of his two subordinates.

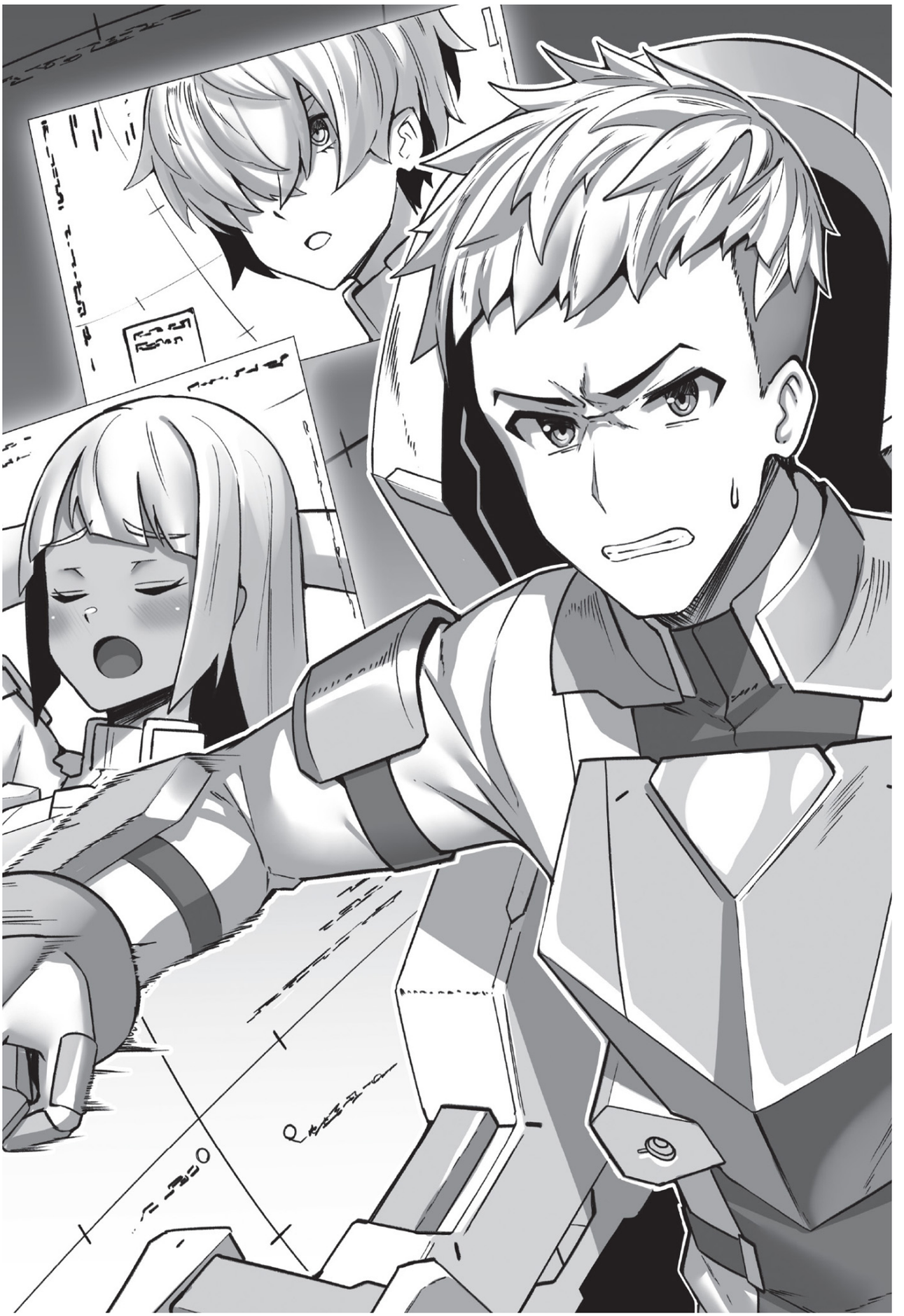
"This old-army scum isn't going to do anything but hold us back, huh?"

***

Watching Russell's squad, Doug sighed as he lazily prepared to sortie nearby.

"Not that we're *going* to sortie this time, with the kid not here."

As soon as the battle started, the Melea had headed for the back of the formation at its own discretion. Emma wasn't around now, so only one platoon was scrambling to sortie as fast as possible.



Larry sat in his cockpit; at this point, he was also ready to go. Doug glanced at him on the monitor. It looked like the younger man had noticed something.

"The hatch is opening…? There's a courier ship here."

"What? During a battle?" Doug responded. "What idiot's making a delivery?"

Once the Melea's hatch was open, a courier ship flew in and swiftly began to offload its cargo. Mechanics gathered, wondering what the courier was doing there, and a worker alighted from the craft.

The worker called for Molly. *"Is there a Private First Class Molly Burrell here?!"*

Molly sped over, and she and the worker started discussing something. Doug listened in through the environmental audio his Raccoon picked up.

"Uh, that's me," Molly said.

"Please sign here for the delivery."

"Huh? But this…"

"Your platoon commander ordered this from the Newlands Company. She paid for our assistance in outfitting the Atalanta with it, so we'll begin right away." Other workers were already getting started.

Molly, however, couldn't keep up with what was happening. *"Wait. Emma?! But she's not back on the Melea yet…"*

"I'm just here to make the delivery."

As the workers began working on the Atalanta, Molly cried out at them not to touch it without permission, then started giving them instructions. *"Hey! You're paying for that if you scratch it! And if you're attaching weapons, you'll do it how I tell you to!"*

Watching all this unfold, Doug was speechless. "The Newlands Company…? The kid's ordering stuff from merchants now? What's she thinking?"

***

Once the Newlands workers finished, they got back aboard their courier ship and left the Melea. Molly was left to look up at the Atalanta and its new equipment.

“Does Emma plan on fighting with weapons we haven’t even calibrated yet?” the mechanic wondered. “She’s really got strange taste to choose these too…”

The weapons Molly considered “strange” were two handguns, each of which had a pair of blades attached above and below the barrel. The blades were only as long as short swords. The weapons were reminiscent of bayonets, but Emma had specified something slightly different. Holsters to store the weapons had been attached to arms on the back of the machine.

“These weren’t just slapped together either,” Molly noted. “The Newlands Company makes good weapons.”

She figured she should at least check the two handguns for any issues they might have, but she could find no faults. As she prepped the Atalanta for launch, the ship lurched slightly.

“Did we get hit?” Molly looked up.

Larry poked his head out of his cockpit. “It was probably just debris. A hit would’ve caused more damage. But I can’t imagine debris would get through our defense fields… I wonder if the colonel messed something up,” he grumbled.

Doug had received word from the bridge, however, and he was scowling. “Not this time. It was the kid. She just landed a high-speed craft on the hull. The bridge is in an uproar. They told her to wait, but she ignored orders and landed anyway.”

Larry sighed. “What’s she doing?”

An air of “Emma’s done it again” went through the hangar before the girl herself appeared there. Apparently, the colonel had ordered her to the bridge, but she’d ignored him and come to the hangar instead.

Molly was glad to see her at first, but she quickly realized that something about the girl was different. “Emma… That’s you, right?”

Part of the difference was the purple pilot suit, but Emma also usually looked more nervous. Today, she appeared full of

confidence—even though she'd just ignored orders and screwed up her landing.

Stopping near the Atalanta's cockpit, Emma asked Molly about the state of the craft. "Molly, did you get those weapons I ordered ready to go?"

Molly was a little daunted by the knight's unusual aura. "Er—yeah, they're ready. But those weapons haven't been calibrated, so I can't guarantee how well they'll work."

Maybe because he saw that Molly was struggling to respond to Emma, Doug got out of his cockpit. "I know you're anxious to get out there, kid, but at least make sure your machine's—"

Emma grabbed his collar and pulled him nearer to her. She sniffed, frowning when she detected alcohol. "You were drinking before this, I take it?"

Doug wasn't sure how to respond to her while she glared at him like this. "Uh, no, I just…"

Emma shoved Doug, then turned her head away from him. "You don't need to sortie, Warrant Officer Walsh. Sober up in a waiting room."

"Wha—?!" Doug scowled, irritated by Emma's tone.

Molly was still too flustered to intervene, so this time, Larry got out of his cockpit. "Hey, Commander, you can't take that attitude after showing up late."

Larry lunged at Emma. She grabbed him by the arm and tossed him; in the zero-gravity hangar, Larry spun through the air until he smacked into a pillar.

"Ow! What was that for?!"

Emma glared at him and said coldly, "I was just putting a subordinate who wasn't ready to sortie on standby instead. As for you, Warrant Officer Cramer…you haven't met your training quota, have you? You can stand by with Walsh."

After checking the data she had on Larry on her tablet, she'd flatly ordered him to stand by with Doug, which must've reminded Larry of the knights who'd patronized him in the past. He gazed at Emma with hatred in his eyes.

“You knights think you’re so great, don’t you?!” he exclaimed. “You’re going to look down on me too, huh?!”

The crew members who’d gathered upon hearing the commotion watched Emma coldly. At some point, even Russell’s squad had poked their heads out of their cockpits. Russell was watching Emma with a serious expression on his face.

Meanwhile, Char was enjoying the show, if anything. “Oh, boy. She’s turned her mothership’s crew against her now. Hope they don’t hide a bomb in her mobile knight or something.”

Nothing good ever happened to pilots who made enemies of mechanics. And this was the Melea—it could hardly even be called a functioning part of the military. Emma’s actions seemed shortsighted to Char, who was enjoying imagining what might happen next to her.

Emma didn’t apologize to Larry, however. “You appear to misunderstand something, Warrant Officer. I’m a lieutenant and your superior, and *you* were the one who created grounds to forbid you to sortie.”

In response to Emma’s cold facts, Larry only got more emotional. “You…you’re just the same as other knights after all! You’re all scum who do nothing but look down on other people! Did your senior knight over on the flagship teach you to snub regular soldiers? You talked so big before, but I guess you already changed your mind, huh?”

His words would’ve deflated the usual Emma, but this wasn’t the usual Emma. She stood up tall and shouted, not just at Larry, but at the rest of the Melea’s crew too: “Who’s looking down on other people? You break the rules but expect to get paid? You don’t do your job! Complaining is all you’re good at. Do you think you’re not at fault in the least? Or do you just think that I’ll back down if you raise your voice at me?! You’re the one making light of me, Warrant Officer!”

“Wha…? Goddamn it…” Larry’s eyes were wide with shock. He seemingly hadn’t expected her to put up such a fight, but Emma had hit the nail on the head, and he couldn’t say anything in return.

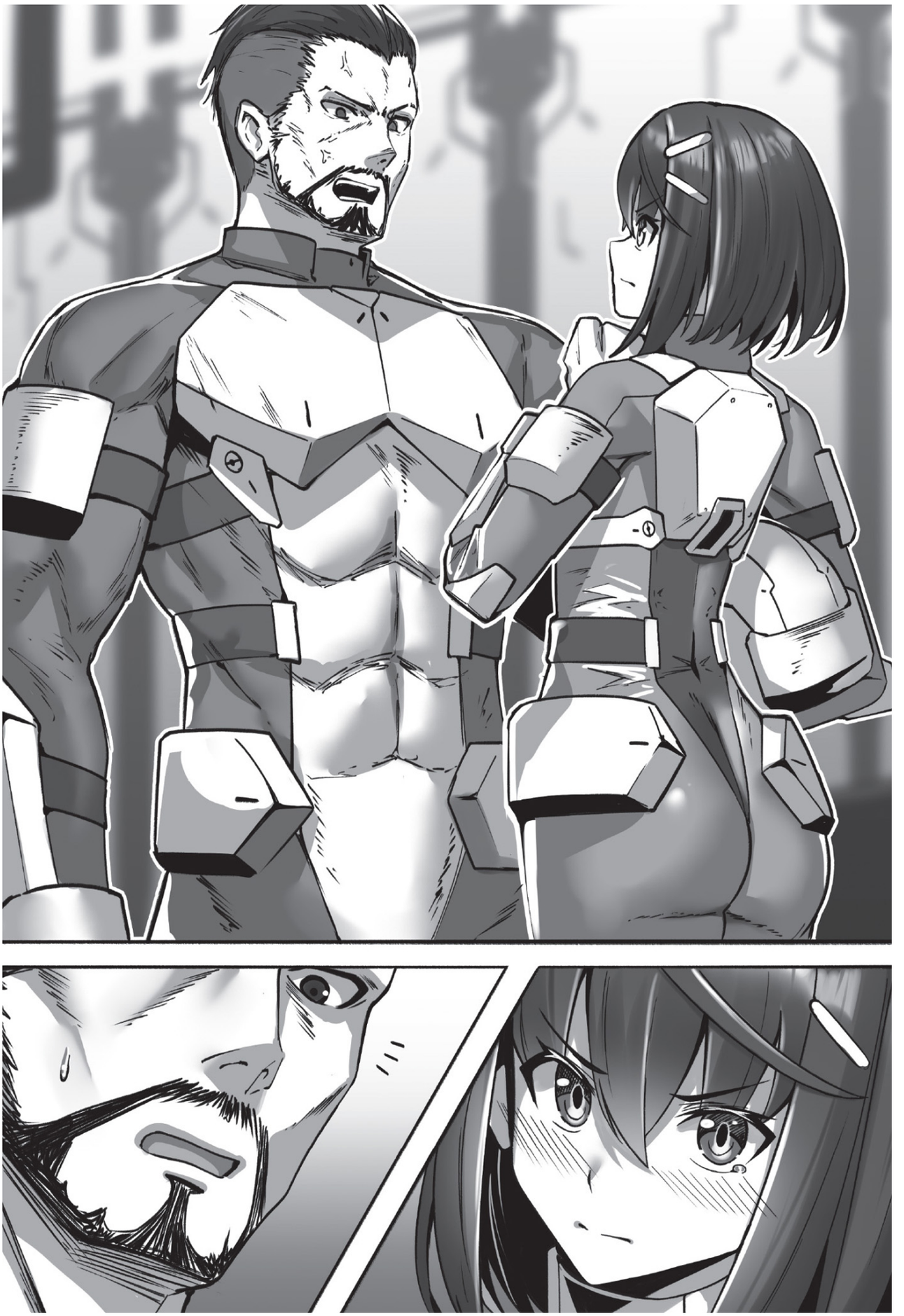
Next, Emma turned to Doug, but with sadness in her eyes instead of scorn. “If your past selves saw what you’ve become, I

think they'd be disgusted. Right now, you're just as rotten as the superiors you hated so much back then."

When Emma said that they were just like Doug's old superiors, the blood rushed to his head. He grabbed her by the collar, growling, "What do you think a kid like you—! You—?"

When their foreheads were almost close enough to touch, Doug realized that there were tears in Emma's eyes. The sudden change in her character bewildered him, and it seemed that it wasn't an easy change for her to make herself.

Emma shoved Doug away. Then, voice quivering slightly, she demanded of the crew members, "How long are you going to shirk things? Will even getting lectured by a kid like me prove too little to wake you up?"



Her speech done, Emma climbed into the Atalanta's cockpit. Watching her go, Doug ground his teeth and clenched his fists. He opened his mouth as though he was going to say something, then shut it again and slammed his fist into a nearby container instead.

Molly was trembling, but Doug and Larry couldn't spare her so much as a thought; both were seeing red.

The rest of the crew looked hatefully after Emma as well. They'd evidently been quite shocked to be told that they were just like their superiors in the old army that they'd hated so much; they were all grimacing bitterly.

Char sighed. "That was it? Boooring." She'd wanted to see more drama.

Jorm was glad that the confrontation had ended, though. "I thought that might get dangerous. I'm relieved it's over."

Russell was just shocked at how much Emma had changed. He looked back at his cockpit interior. "If they can reflect on themselves at this point, I guess they weren't that far gone."

***

In her cockpit, Emma wiped away tears. Up until now, she'd been trying to befriend her subordinates. However, after training with Marie, she'd realized something: Her own naivety was keeping the Melea's crew tied to the military and getting them called to more dangerous battlefields like this one.

"I guess I couldn't be the commander I always wanted to be after all."

Emma had always dreamed of being a commander whose subordinates respected her. Ironically enough, Russell's squad seemed close to her ideal, but circumstances hadn't allowed Emma to lead a similar squad.

"Get rid of that naivety," she told herself. "Right now, your goal is getting everyone out of this alive."

She'd wanted to be a kind commander at first, but now she wanted to be a commander whose troops survived and returned

home. And for the Melea's crew members to make it home, she had to be harsh with all of them, not just herself. Being strict with other people was painful for Emma, but Marie had taught her that that was just her own naivety.

"This is for the best. For now, this is the answer I've settled on…"

Chapter 11:
A Knight's Right

IN THE ATALANTA'S COCKPIT, Emma took a deepbreath to concentrate.

"I have to show them our value. That's all I need to think about right now."

As soon as she was back aboard the Melea, she'd acted coldly with the crew in the hangar. She was aware that she'd gone too far, and she hadn't meant everything she'd said. She'd needed to say it, though. She'd chosen the path to carry out her ideals.

"If the Melea's crew can't get back on their feet here, the army will abandon them."

Emma knew that the crew members had no motivation, but she didn't hate them. She understood that they'd fought desperately to defend House Banfield in the past. Now that their spirits had been broken, she wanted to reach out her hand to them. That was what she'd been working hard to do all this time. But her feelings weren't enough to actually get anything accomplished.

"I'll be as selfish as I need to be to become a knight of justice! I'll show that I'm strong enough to fight for someone!"

Mustering her courage, Emma opened a comms line to the bridge and made her request. "This is Lieutenant Emma Rodman. Bridge, the Melea is too far from the rest of the fleet. Please move the ship to the designated point." As she spoke, she displayed a set of coordinates, to the bewilderment of the operator on the other end of the line.

A moment later, the operator comprehended what she'd said. *"Are you full of yourself or what, kid?"* they barked back. *"You think a lieutenant like you can give orders to the bridge just 'cause you're a special little knight?"*

The operator's tone was intimidating, but Emma made sure there was no fear in her voice as she replied, "The prescribed formation placed the Melea closer to the front line. If we stay in this location, we'll be defying orders."

“Who do you think you are?”

Before the operator could say more, Colonel Baker switched in. *“Lieutenant, the Melea will remain on standby in the rear.”*

“Why? You want us to sit back here and just watch our allies fight for their lives right in front of us?”

“That’s right.” The commander showed not a shred of guilt over his decision. *“In the past, we’ve endured any number of completely unreasonable orders. We’re not like you, lieutenant. We’ve seen hell before.”*

The old army *had* seen hell in the past. They’d probably experienced battlefields Emma couldn’t even imagine. But what did that matter? It was no reason to abandon allies fighting right in front of them.

“I understand your perspective, but I can’t overlook your flagrant disregard for your orders,” Emma replied. “Therefore, I will temporarily take command of the Melea.”

Colonel Baker’s eyes widened. *“What’re you saying? You’re a lieutenant, you know!”*

In a normal army, Emma’s demand would’ve been unthinkable. But this was House Banfield’s army, which operated according to the Imperial chain of command.

“I can’t overlook a commander disobeying orders,” Emma said. “Regardless of their rank, knights have the right to take the reins of units under certain circumstances. I’ve determined this to be such a circumstance.”

Knights *were* entitled to take command, their rank notwithstanding, but that came with a heavy responsibility. If they were determined to have abused the privilege, they could be punished. It wasn’t a power they could wield whenever they wanted. Emma had exercised that right knowing the potential consequences full well.

In response, Colonel Baker gave her a piercing look. *“Do you really think anyone on this ship will listen to your orders, Lieutenant? This is ridiculous!”*

“I feel the same way. How long will you keep up this stubborn resistance?”

“What?”

“The army has upgraded the Melea and furnished it with brand-new equipment. Now that they’ve improved your circumstances, don’t you think it’s time for you to reciprocate, Commander?”

“What do you know? You’re just an ignorant kid. What we went through in the past—”

“I’m talking about the present, Commander. If you’re going to make excuses to avoid responsibility, then you should leave the army while you can still do it with dignity.”

The colonel had no response for Emma’s sound logic. As if to run away, he cut the call.

Emma ground her teeth. *If I just sortie alone, it won’t change anything for the Melea.*

She had gathered that she was out of options when the Melea received a call from the flagship. Its vice commander, Haydi, appeared on her monitor. *“This is Brigadier General Haydi. Orders for the Melea. Lieutenant Emma Rodman is to take command of the ship, effective immediately. And Russell’s squad is all yours too, Lieutenant.”*

At that, Emma hesitated for a moment. “I-I’m a lieutenant, sir. I can’t command Captain Bonner’s squad.”

Haydi gave her a knowing look, as though he’d expected her to say that. *“I’ve got great news for you, then. For now, we’re temporarily raising your rank to captain. In addition, for the time being, your knight rank will be A. So as I said, they’re all yours, pilot of the Atalanta.”*

“That’s—! No… Thank you, sir.”

“No need for that. This is something of an ultimatum, you see.”

Haydi was essentially conveying a message: *“If that isn’t enough, then give up.”* If Emma couldn’t produce results even with Russell’s squad working for her, she’d have to write off the Melea.

Haydi’s final comment was for the Melea’s commander. *“And, Colonel, I’m not overlooking any more failures to follow orders. If you disobey this command as well, you can expect to have your whole crew put to the firing squad.”* After saying what he had to say, he ended the call.

Colonel Baker slammed his fist down on his chair's armrest. *"Damn snobby knights!"*

He disappeared from Emma's screen as well, and an operator appeared again with a truly disgusted expression. *"Tch! Flying straight into certain death—just like you want! Will that be all,* ma'am*?"*

Emma kept her cool. "Please hurry. Our allies are at a disadvantage against so many foes."

"We know that, okay?" the operator grumbled bitterly.

***

Aboard the Dahlia Mercenaries' flagship, Sirena frowned at the number of vessels in the rebel army's fleet.

"If they'd had the number of ships we expected, this would've been much easier."

The Dahlia Mercenaries were providing five hundred ships for this operation. With the rebel army's craft, their force numbered two thousand vessels total. If they were mere space pirates, Sirena would've been uneasy with a fleet that size. The rebel army had been part of the regular army until just recently, however, and Sirena had personally trained the Dahlia Mercenaries' forces. Even going up against House Banfield, their chances of victory were more than decent.

Her adjutant agreed. "The enemy's holding out well too. They're putting up a good fight against double their numbers. Their commander must be experienced."

On her tablet, Sirena checked the data River had provided on the enemy commander. "Lieutenant General Marie Marian... Hm? This says she's attending an Imperial college."

"She's going to school? If she has no middle name, does that mean she's a knight candidate?"

"Is she the type with extenuating circumstances? Maybe they pulled her from some foreign nation, and they're trying to get her qualified as an Imperial knight now."

“Nobles have always got to have their way, right? In that case, she’s probably not someone we can shrug off. What do you want to do? At this rate, even if we don’t lose, we’ll take casualties.”

No one else was that worried, since they didn’t have much information on the enemy commander. Sirena had a bad gut feeling about her, though.

“Get my craft ready,” she directed. “If we destroy one of those transport ships they’re guarding, that should disrupt their command somewhat.”

Her adjutant nodded, ordering, “Ready the Gold Raccoon on the double!”

Sirena scowled. She evidently disliked the name. “I thought I told you that we’re changing the craft’s name to the Chimera.”

“Huh? Oh, right. I’m not sure that name really suits—”

“Shut up!”

“Y-yes, ma’am! Ready the commander’s *Chimera* to deploy on the double!”

***

When the Melea joined the battle, enemy bombardment awaited it. Communications flew in all around the Atalanta’s cockpit. The first was from the bridge.

“Now we’re in trouble! Good going, Little Miss Knight! Hey—our defense fields will hold, right?”

“They’re a lot stronger after our upgrades.”

“Then get rid of those nuisances already!”

While the bridge was trying to chase out Emma and her “nuisances,” Russell’s squad squabbled among themselves.

“How come we have to follow her *orders?!”* Char grumbled. *“I don’t care if she’s been temporarily promoted. We still have Russell!”*

Jorm didn’t seem to agree with Haydi’s command either. *“I know that’s what the vice commander told us to do, but I don’t*

understand it either. I guess someone's got friends in high places." He wasn't exactly wrong.

Russell may have been dissatisfied himself, but he was still at least determined to follow orders. *"Those are our instructions, you two. If they come directly from Lady Marie, our duty is to follow them, however we feel about them personally."*

Char still wasn't convinced, however. *"Your personal feelings are the reason you want to obey, Captain!"*

"Well, yeah," Jorm agreed. *"He's got orders from the knight he admires. In fact, I bet he wants to show off so that she'll compliment him."*

Ignoring the pair, Russell asked Emma, *"So, Lieu—no, Captain Rodman—what's our objective?"*

Emma was envious of the way the three could squabble, yet still more or less agree on what was important. "We'll attack groups of enemies to assist our struggling allies."

Those allies had their hands full protecting the transport vessels, and they couldn't move freely. The enemy was getting closer and closer, attacking at practically point-blank range. Both sides had deployed mobile knights, creating a fierce melee, and were fighting viciously on the very small battlefield.

"Understood."

"Huh?" Emma hadn't expected Russell to agree to her orders so easily. It must've shown on her face.

Russell looked away awkwardly. *"I'm not acknowledging you yet. Still, I'm not about to disobey orders. If our superiors want me under your command, I'll act accordingly. But if I judge you incapable of commanding us, I'll report that to the brigadier general myself."*

Emma had never gotten along well with Russell, who had always been a bit full of himself as one of the academy's elites. After gaining some experience, though, she was starting to feel like he wasn't a bad person to have on her side.

"Thank you. Okay, let's sortie."

She unlocked the arm fixing the Atalanta in place and used it to relocate the craft to its electromagnetic catapult. The custom Nemains belong to Russell's squad followed suit.

“Ready,” an operator’s lazy voice told her.

“Atalanta deploying.”

She launched from the catapult and shot out into space; the Atalanta immediately used its backpack boosters to accelerate. Matching her speed to that of the custom Nemains following her, Emma took point to lead them.

“Target the enemy ships!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Yeah, yeah…”

“This might be my first time in a four-unit formation.”

The three of them might’ve had complaints about Emma, but they still followed her orders. The four craft headed for a cluster of enemies hassling one of their allies—a collection of several dozen vessels led by a five-hundred-meter-class battleship.

Emma and her allies headed straight for that command ship.

“We’ll target the command ship first,” she declared.

The Atalanta readied its multipurpose custom beam rifle, but the first to attack the enemy was Jorm, from the back of their formation. He had drawn a large rifle and shot before Emma could.

“Pretty reckless to go straight for the biggest one,” he noted. *“I’ll back you up.”*

Jorm had targeted one of the mobile knights defending the command ship. As he took another craft down immediately after the first, Emma felt strongly that his skills were the real deal.

Next, Char charged into the enemies. *“Man, if they’re not piloted by knights, they won’t count toward my total,”* she whined. Still, her craft engaged the enemy, securing a path forward for Emma.

“Nearby enemy ships are targeting us!” Russell shouted. *“If we overstay our welcome, they’ll shoot us full of holes!”*

Russell was keeping an eye on their surroundings, Emma realized. And concentrated fire would take them down, Nemains or not.

“I’ll destroy them.” *I knew they worked well together, but they’re way stronger than us individually too.*

The Atalanta accelerated and slammed into the enemy ship's defensive field. Sparks flew, and electricity surged around her, but…

"This isn't enough to stop the Atalantaaaaa!" Emma cried.

Its boosters flashed as though spewing flames, and the Atalanta burst through the defensive field. Flying straight toward the enemy ship's bridge, it shot its beam weapon. Charged with the Atalanta's excess energy, the beam pierced the bridge easily, shooting all the way through the hull before emerging from the other side. The bridge blew up, triggering secondary explosions throughout the ship.

Other enemy vessels had started firing antiaircraft weapons at the Atalanta, but it avoided all their fire, speeding away from the command vessel. By that point, Russell's squad was already at Emma's side.

Char watched the enemy craft explode, shocked. *"You seriously charged in there and destroyed the whole ship?"*

As for Emma, she'd just netted herself a sizable success by taking down an enemy ship; that did nothing to quell the nasty feeling in her gut, though.

"…We'll head to our next objective," she instructed. *If we don't hurry, we won't be able to protect the transport ships.*

Their allies were struggling to safeguard those transports from the numerous enemy craft. If they wanted to help, the Atalanta and Russell's squad had to make for their next planned location.

Chapter 12:
Enhanced Soldiers

HAVING TAKEN COMMAND of the Melea, Emmawas forcing its crew to participate in the battle. Meanwhile, she was piloting the Atalanta, leading Russell's squad to assist their struggling allies. The temporary four-machine unit of highly maneuverable Nemains was producing considerable results.

Watching their exploits from the bridge of the flagship, Marie smiled in satisfaction. "Look—they're finally having the effect expected of them. If they try, they can do it after all."

Next to her, Haydi whistled at seeing what they'd accomplished. "That crazy machine from the Third Weapons Factory is even more of a monster than I heard," he said, reviewing the Atalanta's specs.

"Are you stupid?" Marie asked with some exasperation. "You should pay attention to the pilot, not the machine."

"Huh? I mean, I heard she was some singular genius, but…"

"A pilot who was just *talented* couldn't pull all that off with a monster like the Atalanta. This girl's got more potential than the other 'genius,' that's for sure."

"She's *that* good?" Haydi blinked in surprise.

Meanwhile, Marie turned her attention back to the battlefield. "Now, how are things going…?"

Haydi glanced at several screens, registering the information on them instantly; his talent as an adjutant was unimaginable from his normal behavior. His brow furrowed, so it was clear that their position wasn't exactly superior.

"We're putting up a good fight, but we're being overwhelmed. Still, I'd say we're doing fairly well, considering the disadvantage we're at," he said blithely.

Marie thought for a moment. "Simply winning this fight would be tantamount to a loss. We need to achieve a perfect victory."

"Greedy as always, I see." Marie smiled coldly, and Haydi gave her a wary look, asking, "What're you planning, Marie?"

“Isn’t it obvious?”

***

On the rebel army’s flagship, Miguela sat in the commander’s seat, fuming at her subordinates.

“How come we’re struggling so much against an enemy with such inferior numbers?! Get rid of them *now*!”

On her monitor’s simple battlefield display, she could see her front lines being disrupted. The only section maintaining its formation was composed of the Dahlia Mercenaries, a group Miguela hadn’t expected much of.

Standing beside Miguela, the fleet commander explained the situation to her for the umpteenth time in an irritated tone. “If we don’t want to damage the transport ships, we can’t press any harder.”

They’d succeeded in launching a surprise attack on the enemy. The problem was that Miguela was after the supplies loaded on the transport ships, and she’d personally ordered her forces not to damage the transport vessels.

“We’ll put the supplies aboard those ships to good use ourselves,” she declared. “Do you know just how valuable a single one of those ships is? How many times do I have to tell you that they’re key to our plans?” After all, they needed supplies for both political and military purposes.

The commander very much wanted to obtain the transport vessels as well, but their forces simply didn’t have the means to. “The enemy is powerful. If we don’t give up on those supplies, we aren’t going to defeat them. Won’t it be enough for the supplies not to make it to the Union government?”

Red-faced, Miguela screamed at the commander, “Weren’t *you* the ones who said we needed supplies to mobilize our forces?!”

They’d been arguing for some time now, and Miguela seemed to give up on persuading the commander.

“Fine,” she continued. “Send out the enhanced soldiers already. We also have that humanoid weapon those filthy mercenaries provided us with, don’t we?”

“The enhanced soldiers are our trump card,” the commander spat back bitterly. “I’ll be the one to decide when they’re deployed.”

“You’re defying me? You’re a soldier, aren’t you?”

In the Union, the military was under civilian control, and Miguela’s resistance operated the same way. Of course, Miguela held all the power in the “government” of the latter; she might as well have been the entire government herself.

Fuming, the commander nevertheless shouted, “Deploy the enhanced soldiers!”

***

Standing by in the Gladiator’s cockpit, Nathan received her orders to deploy. As soon as the curt order appeared on her monitor, she activated her craft.

The dim cockpit was instantly illuminated, and the craft’s cameras projected Nathan’s surroundings onto her retinas.

“Guess we weren’t blessed with a particularly capable commander this time.” That much was obvious from what she saw of the battle from her cockpit. “The Union army launched a surprise attack against an adversary with inferior numbers, and we’re still at a disadvantage?”

Even while lamenting her bad luck, Nathan hoped somewhere in her heart that the enemy would be worth fighting.

“Hopefully they’ve got some strong ones…” she said to herself.

Hoping that one of her enemies could end her life as an enhanced soldier, Nathan launched her craft. As soon as she did, other enhanced soldiers surrounded her.

The commander back on the flagship issued their orders in an unnecessarily loud voice. *“Theta YA 0891, your company will deal with the Imperial knights sinking our allied ships.”*

“Roger that…”

“Take them down at any cost, do you hear me? They’re an enemy ace squadron.”

Hearing that she was facing a group of aces, Nathan couldn’t help getting her hopes up. *With any luck, someone out there can shoot me down.*

***

“That’s the eighth ship!”

In the seat of his custom Nemain, Russell was sweating. The sight of the flaming enemy cruiser his squad had just taken down filled his monitor. That first ship they’d sunk had been an impressive achievement, but based on that, the rebel army had seemingly determined that they couldn’t ignore Russell’s squad. Now he and his squad mates were fighting a hard fight, the enemy coming at them doggedly.

He swiftly checked his remaining ammo, oxygen, and energy.

“I can keep fighting, but it’ll be tough…”

As he considered when they should resupply, he noticed a mobile-knight squadron deploying from the enemy fleet. The Union called those craft “humanoid weapons,” and something about them bothered him.

“They’re different from the craft we’ve seen so far…”

The Union Army craft they’d fought until now had a different design than these ones did. Their simplicity fit the Union’s preferences, but otherwise their design resembled the Empire’s mobile knights.

“Are they new?”

The squad of humanoid weapons was headed straight for them, and they weren’t moving like normal soldiers.

Sharp-eyed Char identified that the craft was piloted by enhanced soldiers and rushed at them right away. *“If you’re enhanced soldiers, you can add to my score!”*

She raced into the squad with her two laser blades. It didn’t go the way it usually did, however. The enemy squad dispersed, moved

to surround Char's custom Nemain, and fired on her dispassionately. Char hurried to avoid their attacks; she also sensed something different about these enemies.

"Don't engage them carelessly!" Russell warned. He and Jorm provided cover fire, swiftly rescuing Char.

The experience seemed to have spooked her. *"These guys are nothing like those space pirates!"*

Behind her, Jorm raised his rifle nervously. *"Here come the enhanced soldiers, I guess. Their higher-ups didn't have anywhere better to send them?"*

The enhanced soldiers had indeed been deployed right in the squad's sector of the battlefield.

"Can you take them, Char?" Russell asked right away.

Despite his vague wording, Char knew what he was asking. *"One on one? Easily. But these guys look like they specialize in group fighting. That might be rough."*

Determining the situation to be dangerous, Russell cursed his own bad judgment. "We stood out too much. No—regardless of that, we should've resupplied sooner."

All their hard fighting until now meant that the squad didn't have the ammo or energy to take on these enhanced soldiers. If they tried to escape at this point, they'd just be pursued and shot down from behind. Even if they made it all the way to the Melea, their pursuers would just shoot it down. And if, against all odds, they survived, the enhanced soldiers would keep attacking their allies, dealing significant damage to their fleet. The situation was essentially disastrous.

Amid all this, the Atalanta mounted its multipurpose beam rifle on its back, switching to the two handguns it'd had holstered.

"What are you doing, Rodman?!" Russell wondered what she thought she'd accomplish at this point with weapons like those.

"I'll engage them."

Getting a bad gut feeling about the situation, Russell tried to stop her. "Are you throwing your life away?! You can't! We'll support you!" He couldn't just abandon her, so he was determined to assist her with what limited ammo they still had.

Emma rejected his aid. *“That won’t be necessary. As I am now, I won’t even need to overload my craft…”*

The Atalanta accelerated, blue-white light trailing from its boosters. It flew at an enemy craft, then sliced into it brutally with the blades on the ends of its handguns.

The way Emma moved shocked Char. *“She’s fast! Is this that secret weapon?!”*

The Atalanta had been developed in secret, but at this point, it had been on the field often enough that rumors about it had circulated among House Banfield’s knights. The ones who’d seen the Atalanta in action all described it the same way—they said it was like a bolt of lightning.

“So these are Rodman’s true abilities…”

Russell himself had said that she wasn’t fit for knighthood, yet he was watching her Atalanta take out craft after craft. With just one mobile knight of her own, she was going up against a whole squad of highly coordinated humanoid weapons.

Rodman… Are you really…? Ugh…!

At first, Russell didn’t want to believe what he was seeing. He collected himself quickly, though. “Don’t let Rodman fight alone!”

With Char and Jorm behind him, he went to provide her with support.

***

One enhanced soldier was having a hard time fighting this speedy mobile knight. The craft was truly ridiculous, built in a completely absurd way to maximize its speed; its pilot fought terribly as well, leaving their comrades behind and rushing at enemies alone. Even its design was wasteful. Coming up with something so inefficient was just like the Empire.

The mobile knight’s weapons were laughable too. Handguns with blades attached in both hands?

“You’re pretty strong for an Imperial knight playing gunslinger.”

Enhanced soldiers' emotions were limited; they didn't feel much fear. Even when comrades were shot down one by one around them, they prioritized following orders without trying to run for their lives.

Still, facing off against this dual-gun-wielding mobile knight rattled them a bit. If they kept their distance, it shot at them, and if they got close, it slashed at them. This single craft had disrupted the rebels' formation and was taking them down one by one.

"Those three supporting it are trouble too. I'd like to get rid of them first, but the dual gunslinger takes out anyone who tries."

The mobile knight's sharp-eyed pilot went straight for anyone who began aiming at its support craft.

"Guess the Empire got some crazy ace while I was asleep… I at least wanted to hear their name at the end. But… Nope, doesn't look like that's happening."

Those dual guns were right in front of the eyes of the man in the humanoid weapon's cockpit. Their bayonet-like additions gave off pale light, suggesting that they were physical blades encased in lasers.

The enemy mobile knight was aiming slightly above the enhanced soldiers' cockpits, but the enhanced soldiers' humanoid weapons were rigged to self-destruct so that their pilots couldn't be taken prisoner. The man's craft shuddered, and his self-destruct device activated.

Readying himself for the end, he thought back to his conversation with Nathan before they'd deployed. "I was right to ask about Nathan's name. Now I can die without any regrets."

The dual gunslinger kicked his craft away, and he heard Nathan's voice: *"I'll avenge you…"*

He knew that she wasn't there in time to save him. That didn't bother him, however. He'd failed countless allies in the past as well. "Our ace is strong, dual gunslinger…so you'd better prepare yourself."

Just as he finished talking, his craft exploded.

***

The man Nathan had spoken to before deploying had perished; that was all that had happened. Still, it was enough to make something well up in Nathan's cold heart.

"All units. I'll engage the dual gunslinger. The rest of you target the three craft providing their support."

"Roger," Nathan's subordinates responded calmly.

She waited until they'd headed for those three craft, then got between them and the enemy mobile knight when it attempted to pursue them. Stopping the enemy with the Vulcan on her craft's chest, she drew a knife from the unit's knee armor.

"You'll be fighting me now, dual gunslinger."

Nathan had been concentrating on commanding her squadron, but now she'd fight with all her might. The dual gunslinger must have registered her as a threat in turn, because she sensed it focusing on her.

When their one-on-one fight started, Nathan began to understand the enemy craft's ridiculous specs. "Its specs outshine mine. My craft's engineered for maneuverability too, but it can't compare, huh?"

As Nathan calmly piloted her humanoid weapon, she gave up on trying to keep pace with the enemy. She paid attention to her surroundings, ensuring that the dual gunslinger couldn't get too far away from her. All she needed to do was make sure the mobile knight couldn't ignore her.

"Your speed's impressive," Nathan said, "but that's all you really have going for you."

The enemy craft sped toward her, firing, but Nathan avoided its attacks and fired back with a beam machine gun. A few shots connected, but they just softened the enemy's armor somewhat.

"I see even its plating is unique. Is this one of those special units? I haven't fought any of them in a while."

Gradually gaining information about the enemy's capabilities, Nathan put a plan together mentally to fight this foe. The dual gunslinger got close, slashing at Nathan with its blades, but she deflected the attack with her knife.

“I thought as much. You’re fast, but you’ve got nothing to finish the fight with.”

The craft had toyed with her allies, but Nathan determined that it was no threat to her. Those handguns couldn’t fire as fast as a machine gun and didn’t have a rifle’s power. On top of that, their blades were only the length of short swords, which Nathan could handle easily in close combat.

“So…you’re no match for me either,” Nathan murmured, sounding just a bit disappointed.

***

“This one… The pilot’s good!”

Enduring the heavy g-force in the Atalanta’s cockpit, Emma fixed her eyes on the enemy humanoid weapon. She’d pushed her mobile knight to its upper limits, yet still hadn’t taken the other craft down.

Fighting the humanoid weapon really made her understand how formidable enhanced soldiers were. She’d heard that their emotions were limited, but she hadn’t understood how advantageous the ability to fight calmly in any situation would be.

One side losing twenty percent of its forces would normally be considered a terrible defeat, but even after that many of their squad mates had been shot down, these soldiers continued to fight unbothered.

The enemy’s higher experience level was really hurting Emma as well.

“The way it positions itself is so frustrating, and it doesn’t waste movements… It’s like it only does things it knows I won’t like, and it won’t let me move how I want to either. So this is how a Union Army ace fights!”

Emma was only concentrating on the humanoid weapon in front of her, but her adversary kept an eye on everything occurring around them as well. Realizing that she couldn’t win at this rate, Emma took a deep breath and removed the Atalanta’s limiter. “Even against an ace, I don’t want to lose! Let’s go, Atalanta!”

As if answering Emma's shout, the mobile knight overloaded. Energy sparked at its joints as its overall output soared. Energy also rushed into its two handguns' blades, and they lit up, shining yellow.

In its overload state, the Atalanta accelerated further. Emma's body pressed into her seat, but she ignored that and kept piloting. As the Atalanta got even faster, the enemy craft seemed to hesitate for a moment. When Emma sped past the humanoid weapon, she managed to slash its thigh.

"Too shallow. The next one will be deeper!"

As she changed directions rapidly, Emma was jostled in the cockpit. Thanks to Marie's training, though, she never let go of the control sticks or took her eyes off the enemy.

"I can do this. As I am now...I can draw out the Atalanta's full potential!"

In the overloaded Atalanta, Emma again rushed at the enemy. The humanoid weapon attacked with its beam machine gun, but Emma's eyes could track its line of fire. She weaved through the rain of beams; the ones that did strike her couldn't penetrate her defense field in the Atalanta's overload state.

The enemy must've decided that its beam machine gun wouldn't be effective; it tossed that weapon away and took out a second knife instead. At the same time, its chest Vulcan spewed flames and fired physical bullets at the Atalanta, which bounced off its plating.

"My armor can take it!"

Charging the enemy, Emma swung her blades again and again, but the humanoid weapon blocked each attack with its knives. Emma was recklessly employing all the speed and power her craft could muster, but her adversary made up for the discrepancy in their specs through sheer skill.

Her opponent *was* good...but Emma thought back to her training with Marie.

"You're not as good as the commander!" she declared.

Marie had seemed like the personification of overwhelming violence itself. This enemy didn't scare Emma as much as she had.

Thinking about how to get through this fight, Emma focused on one part of the Atalanta she wasn't making full use of: its legs.

"That'll work!"

She added some legwork to the Atalanta's attacks, surprising the enemy ace, who evidently hadn't expected the mobile knight to start coming at them with kicks.

"There!"

Emma didn't miss the opening the enemy gave her. She thrust her blades at the humanoid weapon, pulling her guns' triggers again and again. The third shot pierced her foe's armor, hitting above the cockpit.

Cutting off the enemy craft's arms to disable it for good measure, Emma hurried away from it. By that point, she could see the pilot in the exposed cockpit. She wanted them to escape as soon as possible, but the enemy ace showed no sign of leaving her craft, even when it was in a position to explode at any moment.

"Why isn't she ejecting?!" Emma cried.

***

Poking her head out of the cockpit, Nathan gazed at the enemy mobile knight that had defeated her.

"Sparkling gold makes you stand out way too much on the battlefield. I can't understand how those Imperials think at all." The craft was beautiful, though.

As Nathan refused to leave her cockpit, the mobile knight seemed to extend its hand to her.

The enhanced soldier smiled wryly. "You can't empathize with enemies mid-battle. And you would've beaten me faster if you hadn't gone easy on me like that, you know."

She was a little frustrated that her enemy hadn't given their all in what Nathan had considered a serious fight. More than that, however, she was happy that she was finally free.

"Thanks, enemy ace. I can finally call it quits now."

Refusing the hand the enemy held out to her, Nathan was caught as her craft exploded.

The moment before it blew up, she realized what her call sign had meant. A vivid memory played in her mind of a young girl calling her sister: not “Nathan” but “Nee-san.”

At the end, Nathan laughed. “I had it wrong this whole time, huh?”

***

After watching the enemy craft explode, Emma closed her eyes for a moment, then quickly composed herself. *The battle’s not over yet.* Russell’s squad was still fighting for their lives.



When she took the Atalanta out of overload, alarms blared, triggered by the strain she'd put on the craft. The damage wasn't serious, but the mobile knight's capabilities had now fallen below their normal levels. In the past, the Atalanta had needed maintenance as soon as it came out of overload, so this was actually an incredible improvement.

No particular section was severely damaged, and the craft's frame was intact too. Swiftly checking the damage, Emma concluded that she could keep fighting without any real issues.

"I can keep going. I need to save Russell's platoon..."

After fighting the enemy ace, Emma was mentally exhausted, but she took off to help her allies anyway.

Chapter 13:
A Comeback

THE NAME OF THE CRAFT once dubbed the Gold Raccoon had been changed to the Chimera. Its destroyed left arm had been replaced with a special arm longer than the right limb; the new left arm was purple, with a sinister design and vicious claws. A beam cannon was fixed to the back of its hand so that the arm itself functioned as a weapon.

Accompanied by a squad of Dahlia Mercenary mobile knights, Sirena approached one of the transport ships. The Gold Raccoon had come with a feature that let it escape detection on enemy radar, so they could close in easily.

"If we don't take one of these things, this won't amount to much of a revenge."

Sirena had nursed a grudge against House Banfield ever since her attack on the Seventh Weapons Factory. She was prioritizing this attack on the transport ships as a means of retaliation against the house. After all, it would be quite a blow to House Banfield if it couldn't protect the subjects it was supposed to defend.

As the mercenary forces seemingly appeared out of thin air, mobile knights deployed from the transport ship. Seeing them, Sirena's subordinates seemed a little nervous.

"Their bodyguards have shown up, Commander."

Sirena licked her lips. "The Newlands Company does like to brag about its bodyguards, doesn't it? Well, let's play with them."

She swiped at an enemy craft with the Chimera's left arm. The transports' bodyguards surrounded her and started to attack, but particles of light began to emerge from the Chimera's tail-like backpack, and the mobile knight vanished.

"It disappeared?!"

"Find it! Don't let them get any clos—huh?!"

Before the bodyguard could finish, the Chimera got behind it and pierced its cockpit with its ominous left arm. The mobile knight

exploded. Meanwhile, Sirena's subordinates ganged up on the other bodyguards, shooting them down.

"Looks like you're really using that thing to its full potential," one noted as it moved toward her.

"Whether I like this craft or not, I was going to improve after piloting it for two years."

"I'm surprised you keep flying it when you don't like the way it looks."

"It's true, I don't. But I like that it's tough enough not to break with me piloting it."

After losing to House Banfield's Atalanta, Sirena had fought on countless battlefields.

Sirena needed to maintain the Dahlia Mercenaries' reputation as she rebuilt the outfit after losing most of her forces. She'd been using the Chimera in battle during that period, and the craft had stuck with her; her rough piloting hadn't wrecked it. Two years was long enough for Sirena to have taken a liking to it.

"Well, shall we take control of the bridge?"

Checking on Miguela's forces, she saw that they hadn't achieved their objective yet either. House Banfield was giving them a tough fight.

Sirena laughed mockingly. "That woman came all the way out to the battlefield, and it looks like she'll have to go back empty-handed."

***

A distress call from one of the transport ships reached the bridge of the Melea.

"What's that fleet doing, letting the enemy slip past them?"

Colonel Baker had no intention of answering that distress call, especially not when Emma had taken command of his ship from him. He couldn't move the Melea on his own authority anymore—that was his excuse now.

An operator turned around and asked him, “What do we do? All our allies have their hands full fighting enemies already.”

“We do whatever that knight tells us to. Not all of our pilots have permission to sortie anyway, right? She’s getting what she asked for. This is all because she overestimated what we’re capable of.”

When Colonel Baker blamed everything on Emma, the operator grimaced. Was the colonel just like their old superiors who’d sent them into hell, then hadn’t helped them? It seemed Emma’s words had hit home.

The colonel actually felt the same way. He was sitting uneasily in his chair when Doug came to the bridge, still wearing his pilot suit. He’d apparently sobered up too; he looked ready to deploy at any moment.

“Give us permission to sortie, Colonel! If you can’t, we’ll just do it on our own,” Doug said, his face serious.

“Doug? But you—”

Looking behind Doug, Baker saw Larry and the rest of the pilots standing there as well. None of their faces had their usual listless expression.

Doug spoke up on their behalf. “You think we can back down after what the kid told us? I…we…don’t want to be the same as the people we all hated.”

Doug looked regretful of his past behavior. He appeared frustrated…miserable.

He turned around. “We’re deploying whether you like it or not. We don’t want to cause you any trouble, though, so please open the hatch.”

Inside, Colonel Baker himself had also realized that they were just like the superiors they’d hated, and that they were only venting their anger on their current superiors because there was nowhere else for it to go.

He couldn’t do anything about that, though. The old army’s dissolution had been the final straw. The crew’s spirits had broken, and they hadn’t been able to recover.

Colonel Baker adjusted his hat and stood. “What will you do out there when your mobile knights run out of energy? The Melea will head for the transport ship to assist. Let the little lady know.”

The operator was surprised and maybe a little happy. “Will doing that be okay?”

“It’s to protect civilians, so that little brat pretending to be a hero of justice will have no right to complain.”

“Yes, sir!”

The pilots began heading back to their craft, but Colonel Baker stopped Doug. “Doug, is this really what you want?”

Doug answered with his back still turned, sounding embarrassed. “I know it’s not like me, but if I really didn’t do anything after she said all that…I’d be no better than a zombie.”

He left the bridge, and the colonel muttered, “A zombie, huh? True, it’d be no different from death, wouldn’t it?”

They really hadn’t been anything but zombies up until now, had they?

As the pilots left the bridge, Tim muttered to himself, “Should’ve died in battle with my buddies before it came to this.”

Chapter 14:
The Chimera

THE MERCENARIES HAD ATTACKED the transport ship Patrice was aboard.

As the captain and other crew members shouted around her, she glared at their attackers, then furrowed her brow at the mobile knights she saw on the monitor. Most were Bucklers, small craft that had appeared on the market recently and were popular with some mercenaries and space pirates. Among the craft was a golden Raccoon that stood out from the rest. That gave Patrice a hint as to the mercenaries they were facing.

“We couldn’t have worse luck than the Dahlia Mercenaries coming after us.”

Beside her, the captain agreed. “They’re a well-known group. They’ll be more trouble than the rebel army.”

The rebel army’s forces had been well-trained Union Army soldiers until recently, so they were trouble themselves. Still, Patrice and the captain both understood that a widely known mercenary group that had fought in countless places was much more trouble.

There were all sorts of mercenary groups. Some were nothing more than bunches of thugs, while some were on par with any army. The Dahlia Mercenaries belonged to the latter category. They were stronger than some nobles’ private armies, and neither Patrice nor the captain wanted anything to do with them.

Their mobile-knight guards were buying them time, but that Gold Raccoon was taking down those guards one by one. It was a troublesome foe that could create illusions in space to fool enemy radar.

The unit looked slow and heavily armored, but the next-gen specs the Seventh Weapons Factory had given it weren’t just for show. After all, they’d first crafted the Gold Raccoon as a spare machine for Liam. It was an improvement on the mass-produced Raccoons, and it was capable of two or three times more than they were.

As Patrice got more and more anxious, watching their guards get beaten one by one, one of the operators on the bridge gave a report, sounding slightly encouraged. “A light carrier from the escort convoy is approaching!”

When she spotted that craft on the monitor, Patrice sighed in relief. “They’ll buy us some time.”

At the same time, though, she thought, *A single light carrier, huh? Against the Dahlia Mercenaries, that’s not very reassuring. I just hope that, while they’re buying us time, the main force comes to our rescue.*

As a merchant, Patrice could analyze the situation calmly, and her assessment was that a single light carrier wouldn’t stop the Dahlia Mercenaries.

***

Having deployed to help the transport ship, Doug was panicking inside his cockpit.

“I thought these guys looked familiar... They’re the ones from two years ago!”

The small, legless craft their enemies were piloting had inferior specs to the Raccoons’, but the pilots themselves were on another level. They were used to fighting and could use their craft’s unique features effectively. Some were even as strong as knights.

Fighting with a beam gatling gun in his Raccoon’s hands, Doug couldn’t pin down the enemies darting around the battlefield. “I can’t hit them! Did this thing’s calibration get messed up?!”

For a second, he thought his failure to land a shot on the enemy was due to a maintenance error. Molly was the Third Platoon’s mechanic, though; Doug quickly realized that she wouldn’t have made a mistake like that, and that the fault lay with him.

I can’t bring out this Raccoon’s full abilities because it’s not calibrated to me... No, I just lack the skill.

An education capsule had beaten the Raccoon’s controls into Doug’s head, and his physique had been strengthened

simultaneously, but his days of idleness had wasted all that. Education capsules made a big difference, but you forgot information you didn't use, and you got weaker if you didn't train. Avoiding calibration and training meant that he couldn't put his Raccoon to full use on the battlefield.

And Doug wasn't the only one.

"My shots aren't hitting! These targeting settings suck, Molly!" In his Raccoon, Larry was wielding a rifle. His bullets weren't hitting their mark either, and he was blaming the mechanic.

Molly—who was acting as the platoon's operator, since the Melea didn't have one to spare—was furious. *"That's 'cause you slacked off on calibration! You don't spend enough time on calibration* or *training!"*

Mobile knights came with systems that supported their pilots, which were calibrated by collecting pilot data. The longer a pilot spent with their machine, the higher their compatibility became. They didn't need to be fighting real battles; if Larry had spent more time training or looking after calibration, his craft would've performed better. But he and the Melea's other pilots had slacked so much on training and calibration that they were now struggling just to operate their mobile knights.

If they'd been fighting inferior adversaries, the Melea's pilots might've overcome them with their machines' high specs alone, but these were the highly experienced Dahlia Mercenaries. So it was the Melea's forces who being overwhelmed, unable to draw out their craft's full potential. That wasn't limited to Doug's Third Platoon. The other squads that had sortied alongside them were struggling just as much.

Near where the Third Platoon was fighting, Jessica's Sixth Platoon was having a rough time against the enemy Bucklers as well.

"Quit dodging, you little assholes!"

The Melea's crew—Jessica included, of course—had all piloted mobile knights for a long, long time. They certainly weren't below the Dahlia Mercenaries in terms of total experience. So why were they having such a hard time? The answer was obvious to all of them.

In the cockpit of his craft, Doug bemoaned his own inadequacy. “I can’t believe my skills rusted this much. I’m such a…”

Before coming out here, they’d had some confidence in themselves—in their hundred-plus years of piloting experience. But once they found themselves on the field, that confidence evaporated. Their long years of effort and the experience they’d accumulated had wasted away to nothing in the time they’d spent sitting around rotting. They were nothing like they’d been in their heyday anymore. That ineffable “We can fight!” confidence had vanished entirely, and they felt like they heard Emma’s voice echo in their heads.

Neglect your daily training, and your skills decline, eh? I thought she was just acting like she knew everything, but she was exactly right…

Until recently, Doug could blame his poor performance on his craft. Now that they all had cutting-edge Raccoons, though, it was clear as day to the Melea’s forces just how useless they all were.

A gold craft was approaching Doug’s Raccoon.

“That’s the one that was stolen!”

Doug aimed his gatling gun at the craft, but the enemy’s mismatched left arm batted the weapon away. Then that creepy arm grabbed his craft, a comms link opening between them when they made contact.



The enemy pilot must've heard his comment about her craft being stolen. She regarded Doug with interest. *"Were you there two years ago?"*

"Tch!" Doug sucked his teeth and tried to shake the other craft off, but his machine was completely outmatched. The two mobile knights appeared to be the same model, yet the golden Raccoon wasn't budging.

The enemy pilot was a beautiful woman, but her eyes were frighteningly cold. *"Is the Atalanta's pilot here too? Won't you tell me? Or will she come out if I kill you?"*

Doug thought back to Emma calling them "rotten" and refusing to let them sortie. "Killing me won't do anything," he spat. "The kid's not coming out for me."

She's the same as our old superiors. There's no way she'd show up to help me. Emma had abandoned them. She had no reason to come save them.

Sirena sighed and tightened her grip on Doug's craft, evidently losing interest in him. She seemingly planned to crush him just like that, and all Doug could do was watch.

Guess this is it. Why'd I have to go and do something so stupid...? He regretted his stubborn insistence on coming out here, but he felt strangely refreshed as well. *It's not so bad, though. I feel like I came back to life again in the end. Guess I caused the kid some trouble.*

He was thinking about the commander he'd found to be such a pain when he heard her voice.

"I won't let you kill my men!"

***

As soon as Emma found out about the Melea's crisis, she rushed over. She frowned when she spotted the Gold Raccoon on the battlefield.

"It's you, Siren...!"

Siren—one of Sirena's fake names. That was what she'd called herself when she infiltrated the Seventh Weapons Factory to destroy

the Atalanta and got close to Emma. She'd pretended to give Emma kind advice while laughing at her internally. Then she'd killed Captain Duffy, a friendly knight Emma had just started to get to know, right in front of her.

Remembering that, Emma burned with anger. She spurred the Atalanta forward and kicked the Gold Raccoon away when she saw it trying to crush Doug's machine.

The contact opened a comms link between the craft, which Sirena kept open. *"Long time no see. I missed you."*

"You dare show your face in front of me again?!"

The Atalanta aimed its dual guns, and the Gold Raccoon charged at it, left arm raised. Emma pulled the triggers, but her shots bounced harmlessly off the arm's plating.

Sirena must've decided that the Atalanta wasn't a threat with those weapons. The Gold Raccoon accelerated, swinging its arm down at Emma. The attack was careless, but that just showed how confident Sirena was in its power. If she landed a hit, even the Atalanta likely wouldn't be unscathed.

Emma deflected the blow with the blades attached to her guns. "That craft belongs to House Banfield. Give it back, Siren!"

"I don't think so. I like it—besides how it looks. And 'Siren' is my fake name. Call me Sirena when I'm commanding my mercenaries."

"You're mocking me again!"

Emma was just getting more and more angry. When they first met, she'd admired Sirena; she saw her as a mature, confident fellow knight. Emma had wanted to be just like her until the woman herself dispelled Emma's image of her in the worst possible way.

"Well, you're just so mockable, my starry-eyed little knight of justice. Have you grown up at all in the last two years?"

"I'm still on my way to becoming a knight of justice!" Emma proclaimed as they continued their battle.

Sirena's confident smile disappeared, replaced by cold indifference. *"That's why you're an idiot. An ignorant little girl."*

The Gold Raccoon fought harder, and the Atalanta began losing ground.

“I swear you’re going down!” Emma cried.

She blocked the Gold Raccoon’s swipe with her guns, but she couldn’t negate the force behind the blow, and she careened backward.

The Gold Raccoon fired the beam cannon affixed to its hand. Even as she flew backward, Emma avoided the attack, but the beam hit an enemy craft floating nearby and melted through it in an instant.

Seeing the beam cannon’s powerful output, Emma felt cold sweat drip down her forehead. *She really is strong. To make matters worse, I haven’t got much energy left. And I’ve only got a few shots’ worth of ammo. I can’t overload again either.*

The Atalanta was still cooling down after wreaking havoc in its overload state. If Emma forced it into overload again, there was a good chance the craft would break from the inside out.

I pushed myself too hard fighting that ace earlier.

Emma hadn’t expected to face Sirena right after that rebel army squad, but this fight would be hard to pull off without her trump card.

Sirena caught on. *“Huh? Not using your trump card? Or you* can’t *use it? You haven’t been firing either. I suppose you’re almost out of ammo.”*

From the way the Atalanta looked, it was easy to tell that it had just been through a hard fight. Once Sirena had determined that Emma hadn’t had time to resupply or get repairs after her last fight, The Gold Raccoon rushed the other craft.

“Too bad. I wanted to smash you to pieces with my new left arm after you’d used that trump card of yours.”

“I’m not going to lose to you in a place like this!”

Emma was definitely at a disadvantage, but she wasn’t giving up.

***

The Atalanta and the Gold Raccoon were in the middle of an intense fight.

Watching them, Larry shouted at Emma, “Hurry up and use your overload! That way, you can take that thing out in a second, right?”

Still serving as operator, Molly answered in Emma’s place. *“Don’t be stupid! That’s not something she can use as many times as she wants! And she’s been fighting all this time without resupplying at all. Emma and the Atalanta are both at their limits.”*

Larry was about to berate Emma for not resupplying, but before he could open his mouth, he stopped himself. He’d realized why the Atalanta wasn’t able to resupply.

“Why is she fighting like this out here?! Is it for us…?”

Emma knew that the Melea wasn’t in any state to resupply her, but she was still acting recklessly to save them. She was an arrogant knight who looked down on them… But she was still pushing herself, fighting to protect them.

“Why? Why?!”

As Larry wailed in confusion, Jorm’s custom Nemain sped over to his Raccoon. *“Are you staying still on the battlefield ’cause you want to die or something? In that case, I’ll take your rifle and ammo.”*

The Nemain swiped the Raccoon’s weapon, which unlocked quickly, since both craft were from House Banfield.

“Hey, that’s mine!”

“I know, but it’ll be more useful if I’m using it, right?”

Jorm’s custom Nemain immediately aimed at the enemy and started firing. Unlike Larry, Jorm hadn’t neglected his calibration, so his machine quickly adjusted to the new weapon, his shots hitting their mark.

H-he’s good, Larry thought. *But what’s with these guys? How come they’re even helping us?!*

It wasn’t just Jorm. Russell was there too. He’d borrowed a weapon from an immobilized Raccoon and started engaging the Dahlia Mercenaries’ small mobile knights.

“Prioritize assisting allies in distress, Jorm! And Charmel, you see what we’re up against. You’re not just going to fight for your bonus here,” Russell commanded. *“Okay?!”*

Char’s response was unenthusiastic, but she agreed to Russell’s orders nonetheless. *“Yeah, yeah. I know, okay? It won’t be good for my reputation if one of those transports goes down.”*

Char was going up against Bucklers that were likely piloted by knights. Armed with a battle-ax she’d grabbed from a Raccoon, she rushed at the enemy.

Russell continued to give them instructions, taking command of the battlefield while watching it carefully. He kept his eyes on everything going on around him as he fought with a machine gun.

“If your craft’s been damaged, fall back! You—from the Third Platoon—pick up an ally that can’t move and fall back as well.”

Larry moved to grab Doug’s craft, as Russell had instructed. “Doug! If your weapon’s gone, let’s fall back!”

“R-right.”

He was relieved to hear Doug’s shocked voice. As the pair left the battlefield, they continued to watch the battle between the Atalanta and the Gold Raccoon.

“She’s seriously gonna go up against an enemy ace like that?” Larry asked.

He thought that Emma was being reckless, but the Atalanta was slowly gaining ground on the other craft.

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What’s with this girl?!

Inside the Gold Raccoon’s—no, the Chimera’s—cockpit, Sirena was starting to panic. The last time she’d fought Emma, she hadn’t been used to the Gold Raccoon, and she’d had no time to calibrate the new machine; thus, she’d been beaten pretty handily. Now, however, she was more than familiar with the craft. At this point, she’d used it in battle countless times, and it seemed to function

almost like her own arms and legs. Yet she couldn't take down the Atalanta—which wasn't even in its overload state.

Sirena pointed the assault rifle in her right hand at the Atalanta, but the other craft reacted instantly.

Her movements have changed… The Atalanta was being piloted with far more confidence now, and Sirena realized that her adversary had also gained experience. *I haven't been playing around or anything, but still, I've been underestimating her.*

She concentrated, creating an illusion as she rushed at the Atalanta in the Chimera. As she momentarily disappeared from view and from radar, she thrust her mobile knight's left arm out like a spear. The Atalanta couldn't evade the attack completely, yet all Sirena managed was to scrape its chest armor.

For a moment, Sirena thought about just scraping away at the rest of the craft. "I'll give you a nice, slow—damn it!"

When the Chimera scraped its armor, the Atalanta had thrust the blade of one of its guns into the craft's left arm and fired. By the time Sirena noticed, it was too late.

Its left elbow joint destroyed, the Chimera pulled back, no longer able to use the arm. But the Atalanta wasn't letting it escape. Its pursuit keeping pace with Sirena's retreat, it slashed at her with its twin blades.

"Tch!"

Sirena moved forward instead, blocking the attacks with the Chimera's thick chest armor. Bad timing, and the accumulated stress of the fight so far, shattered one of the Atalanta's blades; now its pilot could only use one of her dual guns.

Still, Sirena was sweating. *I can beat her. I can beat her if we keep going. But…it'll take too long.*

At this rate, she'd never capture or destroy one of the transport vessels. She was considering retreat when she received a message from an ally.

It was Miguela.

"What're you doing?! Hurry up and save me!"

Sirena had to stop herself from berating the woman for her pathetic screaming. It was broadcast to every craft in the vicinity, enemy and ally alike, so Miguela had practically handed the enemy their flagship's location.

"To think she's *this* moronic!" Sirena spat before receiving a panicked call from a subordinate.

"Th-this is bad! They're destroying ally ships left and right!"

"Wha—?!" Sirena hastily checked her radar and watched as their allied ships—the rebel army ships—were sunk one by one. Their markers were fading from her radar right in front of her eyes.

At that point, all the ships in the vicinity received a message from the enemy. *"If you don't come and save these ships, Marie Marian will take each and every one of them! What's wrong? Come and get me!"*

The savage voice belonged to a female knight. The commander of the escort convoy herself was on the battlefield in a mobile knight, tearing through enemies.

Sirena's eyes went wide. "Do none of these guys play by the rules?"

Chapter 15:
Marie Marian

THE CRAFT WITH THE distinctive vulpine heads were Teumessas developed by the Seventh Weapons Factory. Marie and the squad she commanded piloted the craft, which were difficult to handle—they lacked assist functions and had to be flown manually. But although using a Teumessa was incredibly challenging, if you mastered it, they were supposedly stronger than craft with the same specs that did have assist functions. Of course, some said that manual piloting naturally required a more skillful pilot, and that was why Teumessas performed so well. In any case, only Marie and her subordinates could pilot these demanding machines.

"It's been a long time since I fought a force like the Union Army," Marie remarked, licking her lips in her cockpit.

Haydi was jealous, having been left behind on the flagship's bridge. "Their *commander can't be fighting on the front lines, right? That's the kind of thing you're supposed to leave to your vice commander!*" He wanted to go fight in a mobile knight instead of commanding the fleet.

Marie smiled at Haydi's complaint. "You can fight next time."

"If there is *a next time… No, never mind. That'd be a pain."* For a moment, he seemed hopeful that he'd get to fight in their next battle; however, he seemed to decide quickly that he didn't want them getting attacked for a third time.

Marie looked at the Union-style ships and humanoid weapons around her and gripped her control sticks hard. "Do you really think that'll be enough to take me down? I see you've got an awfully low opinion of Marie Marian."

She shot down the humanoid weapons gathered around her one by one as she passed them by, keeping up her conversation with Haydi all the while.

"Well, we were active a real long time ago," he pointed out. *"I wouldn't be surprised if they've forgotten us."*

That made sense to Marie. Smiling, she responded, "Then I'll just have to teach them to fear Marie Marian again. I'll make it so

they tremble when they hear my name and never enter Imperial territory—" She closed her mouth and shook her head, then corrected herself. "I'll teach them what happens when they oppose House Banfield."

***

On the monitor of Sirena's Chimera appeared a purple mobile knight looking down at a ship in flames. It had a slender silhouette and distinct vulpine head. Sirena was familiar with this model. She'd heard about them when she'd infiltrated the Seventh Weapons Factory.

"The Seventh's Teumessa..."

The Teumessas were mobile knights specifically crafted for top pilots. Their arrival on the battlefield proved that House Banfield's aces were here. Facing just one would be enough of a problem; worse yet, there were Teumessas all around the knight who'd identified herself as Marie Marian. Not just one or two—there were close to thirty of them.

Those Teumessas were destroying the rebel army's humanoid weapons and ships one by one. They were an elite force—almost like a squad formed of nothing but ace pilots. The rebel army could hardly even put up a fight against them.

Sirena gripped her control sticks. Before she even realized it, she was covered in cold sweat. The word "retreat" flashed in her mind. The Atalanta was going to be trouble, though; its pilot was focused on her and wasn't likely to let her get away.

The girl facing off against her, piloting a craft with a single handgun, was like a completely different person than the one Sirena had fought before.

"You've gotten a lot better," Sirena told her, feigning confidence. "I hardly recognize you as the same girl from two years ago."

"Return that craft right now. It belongs to—"

"A goody two-shoes as always, aren't you? That's what I hate about you!"

Sirena had lost her left arm, but she didn't plan on losing to Emma. The Atalanta was out of ammo, and it couldn't overload either. Its pilot was exhausted as well. When Sirena looked around to check, her allies were also holding their own against the enemy. Some Nemains were still putting up a fight, but at this rate, they'd fall first.

If they had time on their side, Sirena's forces would've won. *If* they had time on their side.

We could've beaten them if the damn rebel army held out a little longer!

While she calculated when to retreat, the Atalanta tossed aside its remaining handgun and drew two laser blades from its side skirts.

"Two swords? Getting a little desperate, are we? Do you really think those'll be enough to beat me?"

The Atalanta rushed at her with its two swords, but Sirena wasn't impressed. From the mobile knight's stance and movements, it was clear to her that the pilot wasn't accomplished with this style.

"It will be!" Emma asserted.

That surprised Sirena a little. She was familiar with the girl, and she hadn't expected her to make the claim so confidently. The Emma she knew was a weak, starry-eyed knight who maybe had a slight knack for piloting. If Emma had just been putting on a brave front, Sirena would've been able to keep mocking her. She sensed that the girl really meant what she said, though, which only served to irritate her.

"You ignorant child!"

Sirena equipped the Chimera with a close-range weapon as well and slashed at the Atalanta. Their energy blades clashed, creating flashes of spark-like light. They traded blows again and again, and Sirena only got more and more nervous.

She keeps coming at me with those clumsy movements! And she's not afraid of me at all! How annoying can this kid be?!

The Chimera's beam axe sliced off the Atalanta's right arm. In that moment, Sirena was sure of her victory—but that was her

undoing. The new Emma plunged her laser blade into the Chimera's shoulder joint, severing its right arm as well.

"Damn it!"

"It's over!"

The Atalanta's laser blade thrust mercilessly toward the Chimera's neck joint, but just then…

"Commander, your craft can't take much more. We're here to assist!"

…Sirena's comrades in Bucklers rushed to help her.

I wanted to finish things with her, but I got a little too obsessed.

As Sirena rued focusing too much on Emma, she regrouped with her subordinates, and they set about trying to destroy the Atalanta. The way things were now, Sirena thought they'd be able to beat it; however, allied Bucklers were downed one by one around her.

"Wha—?!" What was happening?

Before Sirena could wrap her head around it, three Teumessas materialized out of thin air. The surviving Bucklers all rushed the Teumessas at once.

"Reinforcements? Then we'll take these ones down too!"

"Stop!" Sirena tried to stop her enthusiastic subordinates, but by the time she got that word out, a Teumessa wielding a large hammer had already smashed the craft to pieces. The other two Teumessas went after her men and began taking them out left and right.

"Ugh… Retreat!"

When Sirena gave the order, the Bucklers hurried to retreat. The Teumessas didn't pursue them as they turned their backs and fled; protecting the transport ships must've been their priority.

In her cockpit, Sirena cursed her own mistake. "I messed up again! How come that girl always—"

She should have just retreated instead of trying to beat Emma. If she'd been in her right mind, she would've fled as soon as she recognized that they didn't have time to win. Yet for some reason, she could never bring herself to run from Emma.

She'd yet again failed to finish things with the girl. Moreover, she realized that—given all the people she'd lost—she'd unmistakably suffered defeat.

***

After the Dahlia Mercenaries retreated, one of the Teumessas approached the Atalanta.

"Looks like you're okay!" the pilot said. His hearty laughter must've belonged to Carlo.

"Mr. Carlo?! What are you doing here?"

"Marie told me to save you. But I'm impressed that you managed to hold out this long!"

Apparently, from Carlo's perspective, Emma and her squad had accomplished more than enough in this fight.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, we'll take over here. Go resupply while you have the chance."

"Right!" As soon as she'd finished talking to Carlo, Emma checked on her comrades. "Is everyone all right?!"

The custom Nemains piloted by Russell's squad looked badly damaged, but all three were still flying. They'd successfully defended the transport ships and protected the Melea's mobile knights as well.

"We're fine," Russell reported. *"But I'm sorry… Not all the Melea's squads made it out unscathed. Three craft were shot down."*

Emma gasped, her eyes wide. "Three of them…?" She'd heard her allies being shot down on the radio; still, hearing the number of casualties shook her.

Russell must've picked up on her inner turmoil. *"If the commander panics, everyone will sense it. Just act confident. It isn't the best way to word it, but this means we were able to do our job and only lose three units."*

Emma hung her head, trembling slightly. "Still, I didn't want to lose anyone…"

Russell sighed, exasperated. *“If you can’t bear losses, you should leave the military. As long as we survive and keep fighting, you and I are both sure to lose subordinates. If you don’t like that, you should quit right now.”*

Taking his squad mates, Russell began assisting their allies. Emma realized that she was crying and took off her helmet, wiping her face.

“It’s not over yet. I need to come back out here after getting maintenance and resupplying.”

Since the battle wasn’t yet over, Emma prepared to deploy again—but she wouldn’t get the chance.

***

In the hangar of the Melea, Molly did maintenance on the Atalanta. Meanwhile, resting in the cockpit, Emma chewed up a nutritional tablet. By somewhat restoring her stamina with the rations, she was preparing to sortie once more.

“How’s it going, Captain Bonner?”

“It’s slow. I think we’ll need thirty minutes before we can get back out there.”

“Understood.”

Thanks to Molly, the Atalanta was almost ready to head out again. The rest of the Melea’s mechanics weren’t particularly skilled, though. When she heard that Russell’s squad couldn’t deploy again for thirty minutes, Emma left her craft. Doug and Larry were outside waiting for her.

“We’ll get out there too,” Larry insisted. “We can’t just let it end like this.” He was frustrated that they hadn’t been able to lift a finger against the Dahlia Mercenaries.

Emma was happy to see her subordinates finally motivated. In order to make rational judgments without letting her emotions get in the way, however, she donned the mask of a commander. “I can’t allow that. You’ll continue to stand by.”

As Larry scowled in frustration, Doug stepped out in front of Emma. “I think we can help.” They’d bought time earlier when the transport ship needed defending; consequently, they hadn’t lost any of the ships yet.

Although it was true that they’d helped, Emma didn’t change her mind. “I acknowledge that you protected the transport ships, but I can’t let any more of you sacrifice yourselves.”

“Kid!” Doug shouted.

Emma wouldn’t back down, though. “My rank is lieutenant, Warrant Officer, and you two are severely lacking in training. If you sortie again, more people are just going to be killed.”

Emma glanced over at the wreckage of three Raccoons, which had been brought into the hangar. In addition to those wrecked mobile knights, a lot of craft had taken moderate damage, despite the fact that their pilots were safe.

The Raccoon was a craft that the Seventh Weapons Factory had released into the world with every confidence. That they’d fared so poorly against mere mercenaries was due to the pilots’ lack of skill and nothing more.

As Doug, Larry, and Emma argued, they received an emergency transmission.

“Message to all ships. The enemy fleet is retreating. No need to pursue. Repeat, no need to pursue. Melea, stand by next to the transport ships.” It seemed the battle outside had ended.

Emma was relieved to hear that. “I guess it’s over…”

Doug and Larry still seemed to want to speak, but Emma ignored them, returning to the Atalanta’s cockpit for the moment.

***

As soon as she was back on her mothership, Sirena headed for the bridge. She checked the situation there and found that it was far worse than she had thought.

“What happened to Miguela?” she asked.

The operator shook her head. “The flagship tried to flee, but the enemy found it and shot it down. It was a pretty rotten ending too. She claimed she was the president of an intergalactic nation and demanded treatment as such.”

Sirena had expected Miguela to beg for her life, but she was surprised that the enemy had shot her down rather than taking her prisoner. “They didn’t pick her up even though she’d be useful for negotiating with the Union government?”

“I suppose they just didn’t think the leader of the rebel forces was really there on that ship.”

“I guess you’ve got a point.” Coming out here *had* been an error in judgment on Miguela’s part.

That wasn’t all that Sirena’s subordinate had to say. “Anyway, that Marie Marian… She’s more of a monster than I thought.”

“She’s that bad?”

“She destroyed fifteen ships—including battleships—and more than fifty humanoid weapons piloted by enhanced soldiers. If you add in mobile knights piloted by regular soldiers, her kill count is three digits.” The operator’s face was pale; she didn’t appear to be joking. It scared her to realize after the fact that they’d been fighting on the same battlefield as a monster like that.

Sirena felt the same way, but she needed to put on a brave face in front of her subordinates. “What a pain. Well, I don’t want to run into her again, but I guess I’d better think up some countermeasures in case we do.”

Marie Marian was a powerful foe, but there must be a way to defeat her—or so Sirena claimed to reassure her subordinates. At that, the crew seemed to calm a bit.

Meanwhile, Sirena mulled over House Banfield’s fighting strength. *Chengsi, Marie… House Banfield contains a lot of annoying people, and it doesn’t seem like there’s any way to beat them fighting fair. Guess there’s only one solution, then…*

***

After the battle, the Melea's crew put on their dress uniforms and gathered in spots where they could see outside. Each saluted the pilots who'd died in battle. Emma participated as well, wearing a black version of her knightly dress uniform.

Cruel words flew at her from all over.

"Three people died to earn her points, huh?"

"Sounds like *she'll* get a medal for the fight."

"We're just disposable pawns, aren't we?"

Emma's face fell at the words she heard from behind her. *I didn't want anyone to lose their lives. That's why I didn't grant them permission to sortie.*

The pilots who'd died had forced their way onto the battlefield, but from the perspective of regular crew members who didn't know the circumstances, those allies had seemingly been killed because of Emma. Either that, or the crew members knew full well what had happened but were taking out their frustrations on her anyway.

Knights tended to be met with either jealousy or fear. Talking behind her back, just close enough for her to hear, was probably the most these people had the courage for. Emma hung her head.

Russell, who stood beside her, glanced over. "Raise your head," he told her.

"Russ…Captain Bonner?"

"Don't let others' envy and animosity bother you. You fought well, and besides, you did all you could for the crew. If those pilots hadn't had Raccoons, a lot more of them would've died."

Emma hesitated. "I didn't want *anyone* to die." She still couldn't accept it.

Russell's response was purposely cold. "If this is enough to get you down, you really won't make a good knight. You and I are both positioned to lose plenty of subordinates down the line if we keep fighting… If you can't accept that, you should quit being a knight and leave the army."

He was repeating the same thing he'd said out on the battlefield—that Emma should consider giving up on knighthood. He'd told her the same thing when they'd just graduated from the

knight academy, but the words seemed to have a kindness to them now. They sounded like acknowledgment and encouragement.

"You're being nice this time. You used to hate me so much," Emma said, thinking back.

The funeral ended, and the crew was dismissed. As everyone left, Russell scratched his head, speaking about that period with some embarrassment. "Well, back then, I really thought you should give up being a knight. It annoyed me to hear you talk about being a knight of justice when you didn't know anything."

As he spoke frankly, Russell sat down on a nearby bench. Emma sat next to him, and he began opening up to her about his past.

"Back in the knight academy, you all thought that I came from an elite knight family, right?"

Emma nodded with a wry smile. "I heard that your father was a government official."

"That's true. But it's not true that we're a family of elite knights. The truth is that House Banfield doesn't really have *any* families that could be considered elite." It didn't seem like he was joking.

"Huh?" Emma said, cocking her head.

Russell went on to talk about a point in the past before either of them were alive. "Back before the current lord's birth, my father studied like mad and got hired by the government. He was just a regular citizen beforehand. At first, he wanted to do his best for the domain's people, but the government was corrupt back then… You could barely call it functional."

Emma remembered what Claudia had once told her about how the young Liam purged the government of corruption.

Russell's face looked pained. "My father always drank and cried when he talked about things back then. He'd describe how people reached out for help, but he couldn't do anything except watch his corrupt superiors shrug it off. In that environment, the more upstanding you were, the faster you broke. My father almost killed himself drinking several times back then."

"I heard it was bad, but…"

“Yeah. It was so bad that it’s not really funny. Then the regime changed, and our current lord made his reforms. Most of the officials at the time were disposed of for corruption… That’s when my dad’s stories start getting happier. After that, he could finally do the job he’d set out to.”

After Lord Liam deposed those unscrupulous officials, the government had finally functioned as it was supposed to. The day Russell’s father longed for had come.

Russell looked a little embarrassed, as though he’d gotten off topic. “I respect my father, and he seems to feel like he owes Lord Liam a lot. Of course, I respect our lord myself too.”

“I had no idea.” Emma hadn’t known that she and Russell felt the same way in that regard.

Russell still looked embarrassed. “Anyway, that’s why…I couldn’t accept the idea of someone talentless becoming a House Banfield knight. In retrospect, I disliked you for a really childish reason.”

Emma shook her head at his apologetic words. “It’s fine. It’s true that I didn’t have any talent. Back then, I really was a failure.”

When she thought back to how she used to be, all she felt was embarrassment. She couldn’t bring herself to blame Russell for how he’d acted.

Russell smiled. He hadn’t expected her to forgive him. “You’re too kind. But that kindness will hurt you at times. Giving up and leaving the military might be a good decision,” he said, looking serious.

Emma looked back at him, just as serious. “I still plan on becoming a knight of justice, so I won’t quit. I’ll never quit.”

Russell looked a little glad to hear it. “Is that right? I won’t say any more, then.”

Epilogue

AFTER CONCLUDING NEGOTIATIONS with the Union government, the escort convoy returned to their home planet.

On the way back, Emma poked her head into the Melea's training room one day and spotted a few familiar faces alongside Russell's platoon. Some people had started training more regularly after the day of the battle. In fact, even her subordinates were there.

"Doug? Larry?" Emma was so shocked to see them training that she froze just inside the door.

Molly, also present, ran over to her. "Listen, Emma! They both say they'll keep up with their training from now on! I guess that tongue-lashing you gave them really did a number on 'em!"

"Huh? Really?"

Emma looked at the pair; they grimaced, covered in sweat. Larry had been slacking off so much that he couldn't even complete the regular training routine. His face was so pale that he looked sick.

"It has nothing to do with you!" he told her. "We decided this on our own! In that last battle, we realized there were things we could improve on. We're just training because of that."

He panted with exhaustion. Next to him, Doug was covered in sweat. He appeared slightly shocked at how weak he'd gotten after blowing training off for so long.

"You really think we'd start doing something 'cause we got yelled at like little kids?" Doug chimed in. But although he also claimed that they weren't training because of Emma, he added, "Still, you made a few good points, Lieutenant. I guess you got us reflecting on ourselves a bit." He'd called her "Lieutenant."

Molly prodded Emma a few times with her elbow. "See? See?! They're all motivated now!"

Emma had been surprised at first, but now her expression softened. "I guess I'll have to whip you into shape as mobile knight

pilots, then. I'll come up with fine-tuned training routines for you two starting today!"

Larry and Doug's sweaty faces twitched at Emma's display of motivation.

"Give me a break. I've had a long gap in my training here."

"Yeah. And I'm kinda gettin' old, so..."

The two made excuses to get out of Emma's new training routines, but she wasn't backing down now.

"Saying that won't work," she told them. "For now, we'll just add extra time to your training. You'll get more simulator time too. You've got a lot of catching up to do, you know."

Doug and Larry went pale. Considering Emma's behavior lately, they were sure she meant every word.

"Break a leg, guys!" Molly grinned at them—but she was in no position to smile herself.

"Huh? You're joining them, Molly. You can't get out of training just 'cause you're a mechanic."

"Me too?!"

***

As he watched the Third Platoon in the training room, Russell smiled. "I'm glad to see them working together now."

Jorm gave him an odd look. "You really do seem glad. I thought you didn't like Lieutenant Rodman."

"If a rival gets stronger, that just means House Banfield is getting stronger. It's a good thing, isn't it?" Russell said, as though it was completely obvious.

Jorm shrugged. Unable to say anything in response, he instead changed the subject to their squad's problem child. "Anyway, will you do something about Char?"

"Lieutenant Odent, eh?"

Russell glanced over at Char, who was hard at work training. She was covered in sweat, her eyes locked on Emma. She was

apparently feeling somewhat competitive.

“I’m glad that feeling like she has a new rival pushed her to start working so hard. After seeing a knight who outshines her, she’s nice and motivated. That’s not bad, is it?”

Hearing Russell’s interpretation of the situation, Jorm gave him an exasperated look. “The only thing motivating her is her greed. Lieutenant Rodman shot down over twenty enemies in that last fight, including some ships. Char’s just working hard now ’cause Rodman’s getting a medal and a bonus.”

So, Char’s reasons were apparently a bit pettier than Russell assumed—along the lines of “If Emma can do it, I can too!” Russell looked unsure of how to respond to that.

“Well…hmm. Either way, she’s motivated, which is a good thing… Let’s leave it at that.”

***

After its mission, the escort fleet returned to a space fortress near House Banfield’s home planet, Hydra. It was a military base made from a resource satellite, its interior fitted with docks to hold the fleet.

Once the Melea was affixed to a dock, its crew disembarked, including Emma’s Third Platoon and Russell’s squad. But some crew members got off the ship carrying luggage.

“You’re staying?” someone with bags asked Doug.

“Yeah… You’re leaving?”

The departing crew members glanced awkwardly in Emma’s direction. Though they wore complicated expressions, they saluted her politely. When Emma returned their salutes, they grinned wryly.

“The lieutenant’s words woke me up. My spirit’s been broken for ages. I realized that a long time ago, really. I need to move on already. So…I’m leaving the army.”

Doug looked sad to see a longtime comrade leave; still, he celebrated his old friend’s new journey. “What’re you gonna do now?”

“The army’s got a job-training program I’ll go through before returning to civilian life. There’s supposedly work to be had all over the place these days. I’ll take things seriously from now on.”

“Gotcha.”

“You guys work hard too.”

More than forty percent of the crew were leaving with their bags. Emma watched them go, a bitter expression on her face. “If I’d just tried harder…”

That was when Marie and her men alighted from the flagship docked next to the Melea. Emma and company saluted the swiftly moving group of knights.

Haydi was the first one to spot them. “Oh—if it isn’t our hardworking young ones.”

Marie came over to Emma and Russell next. Wrapping her arms around their shoulders, she pulled them close and told them, “You fought well, you two.”

“Y-yes, ma’am! Thank you!”

“It was a good experience for an elite like you, right?” Marie asked Russell. “You should broaden your horizons while you’re young. You’ll need to, if you’re going to be a knight who supports House Banfield.”

“Hngh! I’ll do that, ma’am!”

“Very good.”

Next to Russell, who was almost moved to tears, Emma wasn’t sure what to say. She eventually decided she ought to admit what her selfishness had resulted in to Marie.

“A lot of the crew left the Melea…” she said. She hadn’t been able to rise to Marie’s level.

Marie looked over at the ship, then smiled at Emma. “If half of them stayed, I’d say you did well. Now you’ll get some new crew and reorganize, so you’d better give it your all.”

“Huh?” Emma was surprised to hear that they’d receive new crew members.

Marie grinned at her like a child who’d pulled off a prank. “And those who stayed will remain on the Melea, just like you wanted.

You’d better keep up the good work, Emma Rodman.”

Until now, Marie had only called her “pilot of the Atalanta,” but she’d finally used Emma’s name.

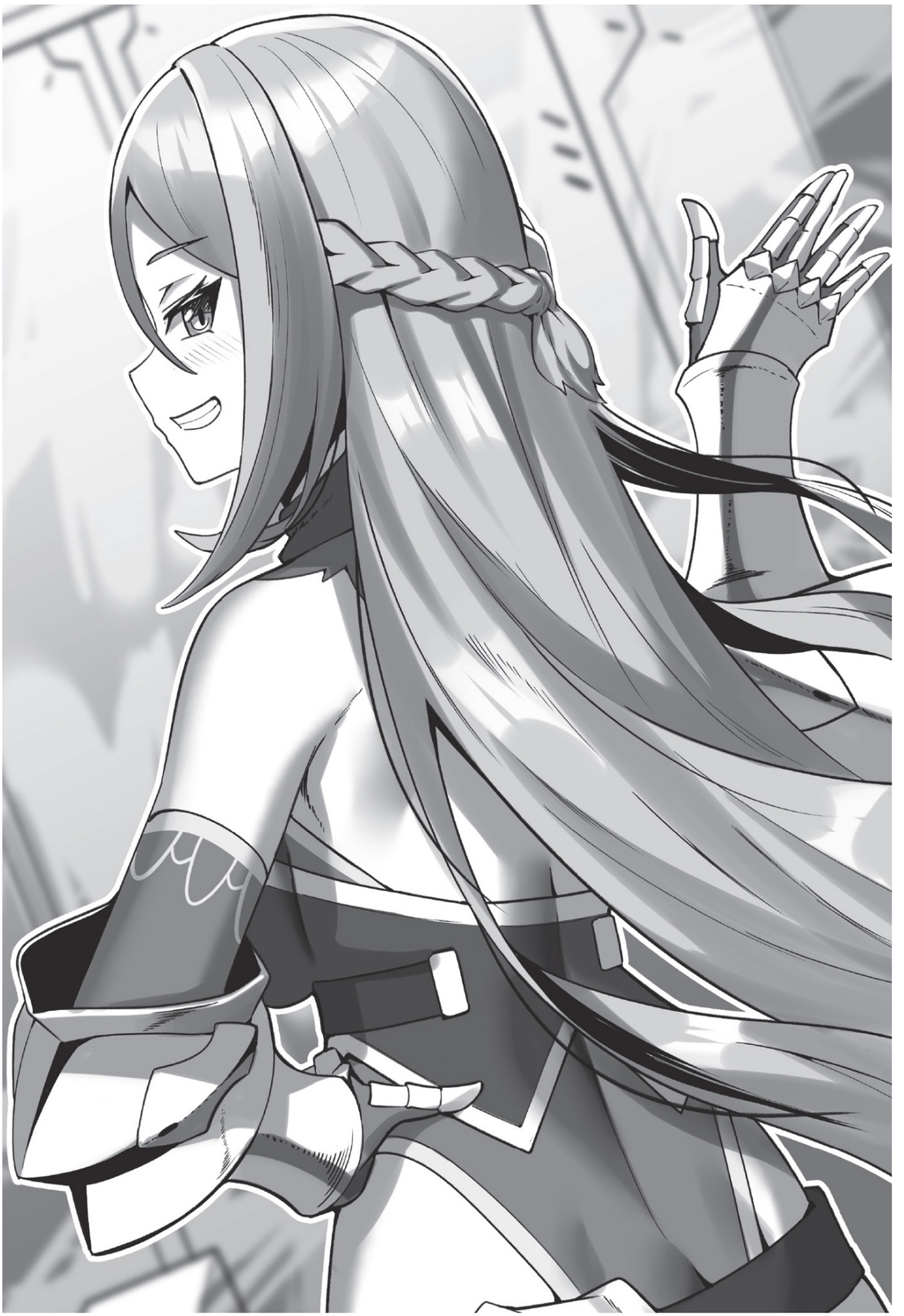
Watching her go, Emma replied a little belatedly, “Y-yes, ma’am!”

***

Having returned to Hydra, Marie and Haydi discussed their future plans in the office they’d been allocated in a government building.

Marie sat lazily at her desk. Not looking over at her, Haydi asked from the couch, “Did you really give your recommendation to the pilot of the Atalanta, Marie?”

On her desk, Marie was putting together some documents—compiling a report on their negotiations with the Union and on the figures active in the background this time around.



In work mode, she responded with no expression, “Call her Emma Rodman, Haydi.”

Haydi shrugged, though he looked happy. “I guess you really liked her. Is that why you recommended her for promotion?”

Marie had decided that, after this mission, Emma should be promoted to captain and her knight rank raised to A. Not much prevented what Marie had decided from becoming reality, so a recommendation from her was more or less a promotion in and of itself.

That made Emma the most successful member of her cohort.

Marie reached a stopping point in her work and stretched, explaining her reasoning to Haydi. “If she’s got the skill and experience, there’s no problem with that. It seems like *she* planned to give the girl time to gain more experience first…”

She referred to Christiana, whose plan had been to train Emma more slowly, keeping her at the rank of lieutenant for the time being.

Marie couldn’t allow that, though. “…But we don’t have time for that. A talented knight needs the right position and opportunities to be of use.”

Marie wouldn’t promote someone simply because she liked them. She’d made those recommendations because she believed that Emma was worthy of them, and that promoting her was the right decision under the current circumstances.

“You’re not wrong,” Haydi agreed. “Should we take Emma in, then?”

Marie looked unsure of how to answer that question. “Lord Liam has his eye on her. If we absorb her into our faction without consulting him, he could be angry with us.”

Haydi looked exhausted. “Well, we don’t want that. I’d rather avoid irritating him too. Okay—I’ll tell our people not to make any overtures to her.”

“Good. Anyway…” In front of her, Marie displayed some documents on the Melea. She checked the contents of several pages at a glance and smiled. “I’m looking forward to seeing how her squad turns out.”

Even back when it defended the border, the Melea had never been fully crewed, and since so many of those who'd served aboard the ship had just left, it was in dire need of new personnel. Given its reputation as a place soldiers were demoted to, however, it would likely only gather rather...unique individuals.

Marie smiled, imagining the way Emma would struggle with some new eccentric subordinates. *Let's see how you'll do with a company under you.*

***

The Melea's crew, Emma included, had returned home on a long vacation, and Emma was visiting her family. She was seated at her desk—though she called it her "work bench"—assembling a plastic model. She finally had time to work on the large pile of models she'd been accumulating.

After finishing a model and admiring it for a bit, she sighed and muttered a comment about her beloved craft. "Haaah... I hope they make an official Atalanta model at some point."

She looked over at the wall of her room that was filled with display shelves. Emma displayed her models on those shelves, keeping the tools to build them in a storage space. She also had a stack of boxes containing models she hadn't yet built.

Emma placed her finished model on a shelf, satisfied at expanding her collection. As she lay down on her bed, admiring her models, there was a knock on her door.

"I'm coming in, Emma," her younger brother called.

"Okay!" she called back.

When he entered the room, he looked a little appalled. "There's nothing but your models in here, as usual."

"Yeah. This is my oasis..." Emma was thrilled to be home and in her own room again.

Her brother, however, was worried about her. "I think you could stand to develop another interest. You know, fashion or something."

“Hmm… Well, I don’t think I need to get into anything like that right now. It’s fine.”

Luca was a bit disgusted to see his sister laze around like this now that she was back home. The young man had dark-brown hair, like Emma, but he was attending college in the domain rather than aiming to become a soldier or a knight. Thus, he knew little about the military. Emma could have told him just how much she’d accomplished, but he wouldn’t really get it.

“I gotta say, you don’t really *look* like a knight who earned a medal,” he remarked.

When Luca brought up that medal, Emma turned her back to him. She didn’t want him to see her expression. She couldn’t be happy about the medal she’d received; after all, it was awarded to her for taking down a large number of enemies—in other words, for killing that many people.

“What does it matter? I can relax at home, can’t I?”

Luca sighed. “Whatever. Anyway, Mom and Dad aren’t going to be home today. We’re supposed to handle lunch ourselves. I’m going to go eat with some friends, but what’re you gonna do?”

Emma remembered her mother saying something about that. She sat up. “I’ll go out too. Ooh—maybe I can go find some food stalls! It’s been forever since I did that!”

Luca gave his excited sister a disappointed look. “You haven’t changed, even now that you’re a knight,” he muttered. “It makes me worry about whether you’ll make it in the military.”

“Well, uh…yeah. I-I’ll do my best,” Emma replied awkwardly. She couldn’t say she’d become a proper knight yet.

***

Emma reached a park with lots of food stalls where she wouldn’t have any trouble finding something to eat. There were tables and chairs here and there too, so no one would have any trouble consuming what they bought on the spot. During the day, the place was lively and full of families; at night, it was busy with adults drinking.

“Looks like there are more stalls around than the last time I was here.”

Excited, Emma went around to different stalls. Pretty soon, she had bags full of food in each hand. She chewed on a skewer of meat as she walked as well.

Not only were there families around her, but young couples as well… It was a truly peaceful sight. This was nothing like the battlefield, but it was what they fought to protect.

“I hope this place stays like this forever.”

Thinking to herself, Emma went by a little girl. The lively, redheaded child looked like she might not even be ten yet.

“Mommy!”

“I keep telling you not to run like that, Ellen!”

“Mommy, Mommy, I want ice cream!” The girl went past Emma.

Her mother picked her up, smiling sweetly at her. “Again? You really love ice cream, don’t you, Ellen? All right, but only one.”

“Okay!”

As Emma watched the heartwarming scene, the little girl noticed her, turning her head toward Emma and tilting it curiously. Emma blinked, then hurriedly waved to her. The girl waved back. Watching the girl and her mother leave, Emma reflected.

“I wonder if I’ll ever have kids… I guess I’d need a husband first. Hmm…can’t really imagine it right now.”

At the moment, romance and marriage just didn’t feel like realistic concerns.

Afterword

I*'M THE HEROIC KNIGHT of an IntergalacticEmpire!* has finally reached Volume Three! This is all thanks to you—the readers who support me.

In this volume, Emma and her friends at last reach a turning point. You might be thinking that I should've told this story back in Volume One. But I first started writing this series just to flesh the setting out a bit more, and it ended up taking this long.

A lot of comments have said things like, "The characters are completely different than in the main series!" But this series is supposed to show a new side to them, since I don't have time to write that much about them in that series. There's a lot of stuff I haven't got time to cover in there, after all (sweat). I'm always revising things and adding to every volume, but those things have limits, you know?

I wrote this series to take a break, and to put what I couldn't add to the main series into a spin-off instead, so I'm aware that it has pretty big flaws as a stand-alone work. When it came time to novelize it, I was a bit worried. I mean, the popularity of the spin-off protagonist, Emma, is, well... Even I, the author, am starting to panic and think that I really need to do something about this (lol)!

Still, we've made it all the way to Volume Three. I'm always thrilled whenever I get to release a new volume. I'd be overjoyed if you kept supporting this series, as well as *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!*



Goin' through the stack.
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