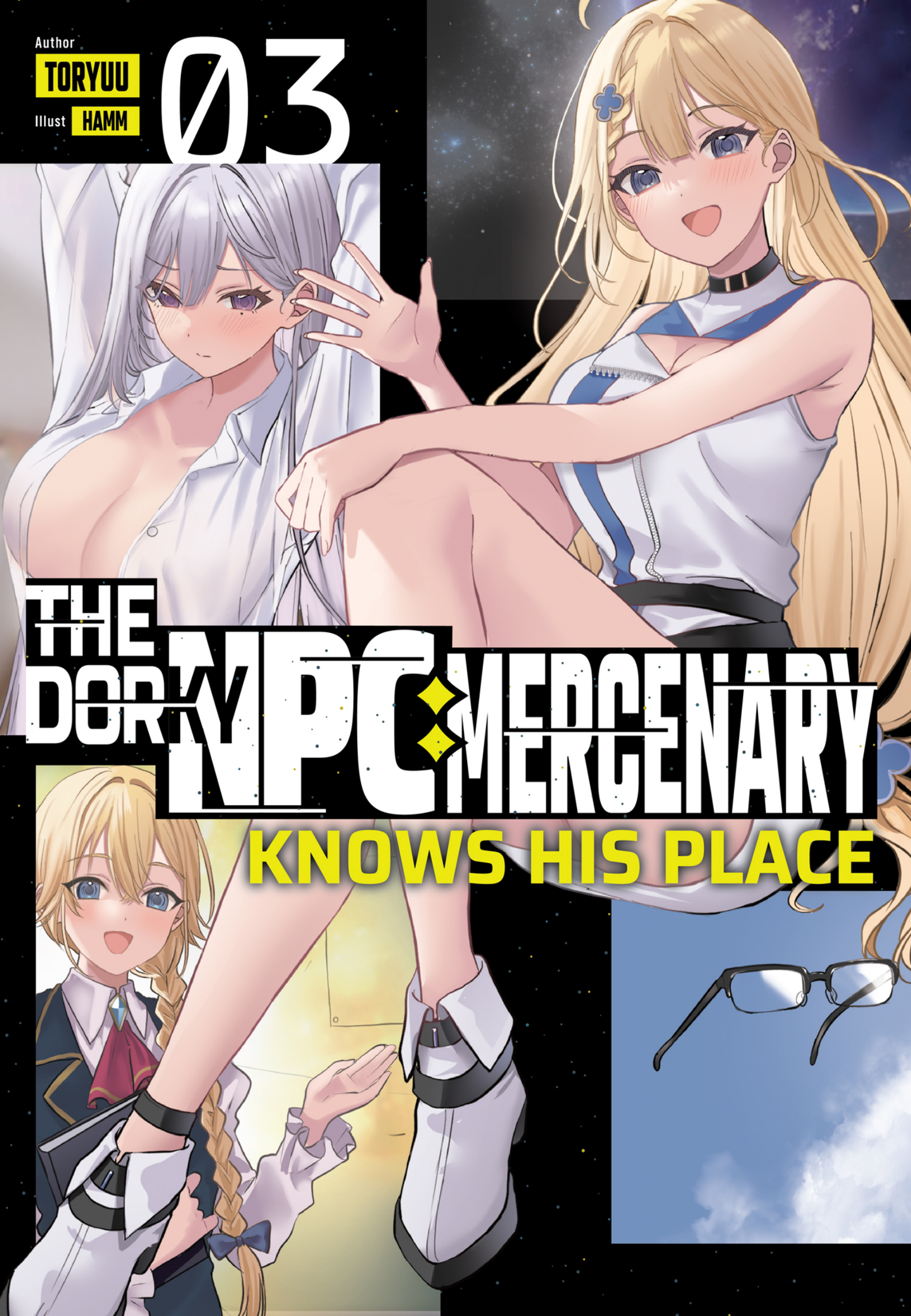
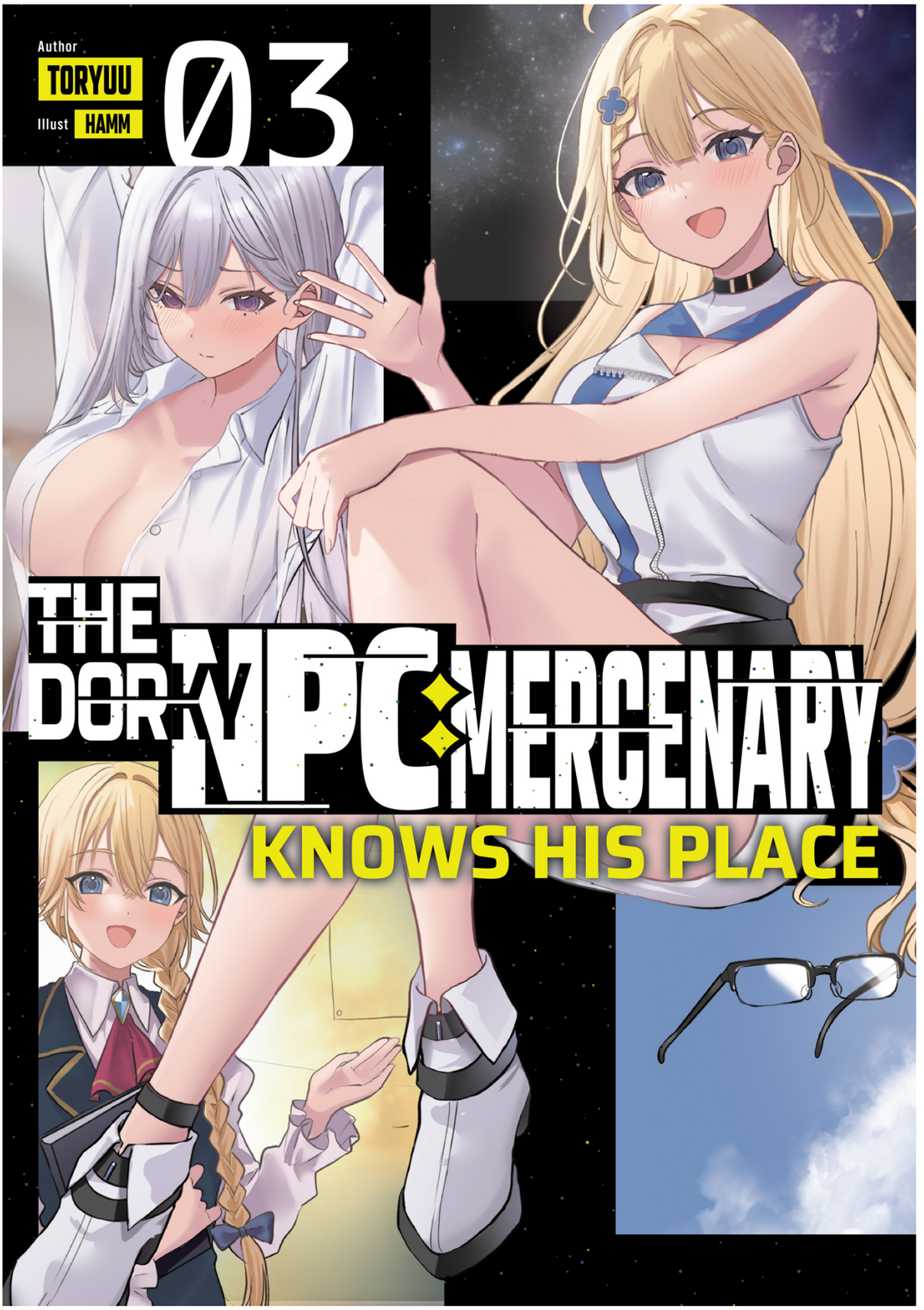
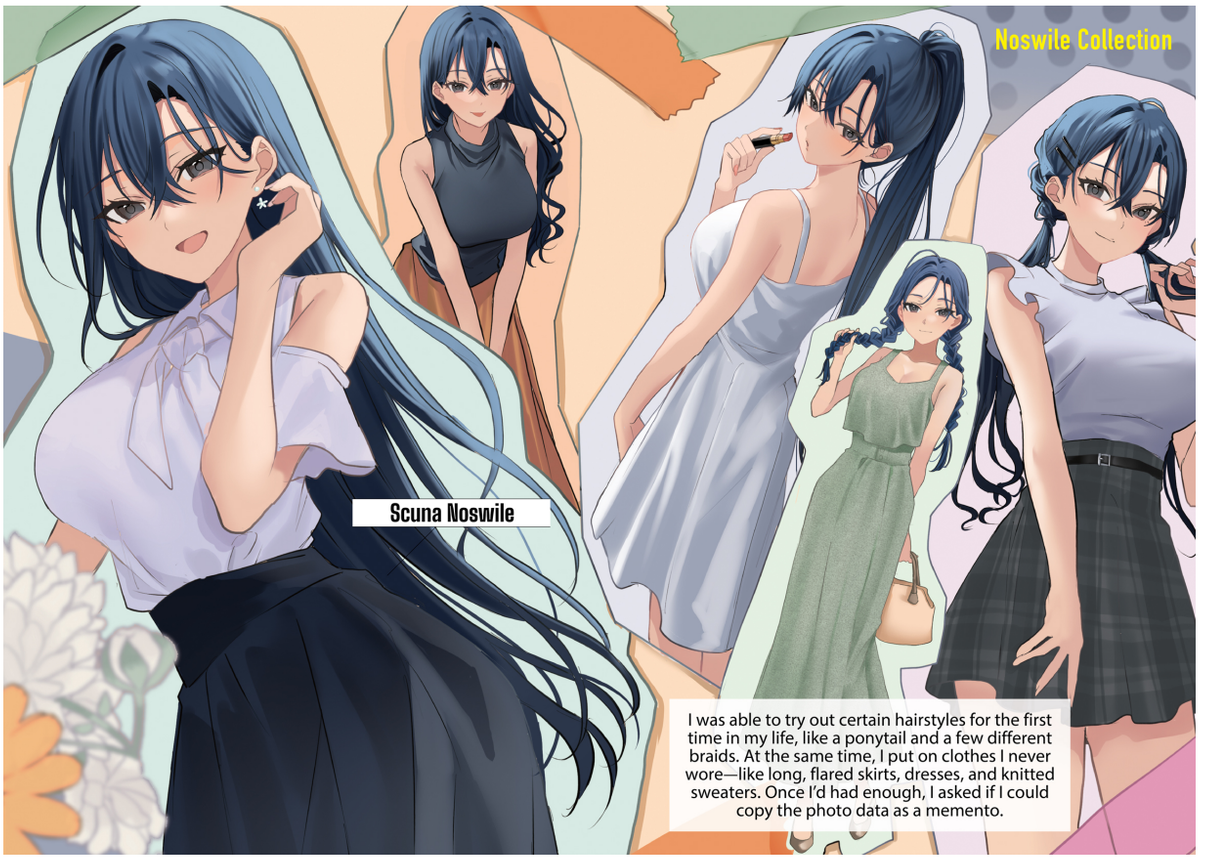

Author
TORYUU
Illust
HAMM
03
THE DORK NPC MERCENARY
KNOWS HIS PLACE


Author
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03
THE DORKY NPC MERCENARY
KNOWS HIS PLACE


Rossweisse
“He was kind enough to talk to me about Lambert...”
Rossweisse added, backing up my story. That’s true, we did talk about Lambert... You’ve really changed your tune since then, huh? She’s in that so-called lovey-dovey phase now.
John Ouzos


Noswile Collection
Scuna Noswile
I was able to try out certain hairstyles for the first time in my life, like a ponytail and a few different braids. At the same time, I put on clothes I never wore—like long, flared skirts, dresses, and knitted sweaters. Once I'd had enough, I asked if I could copy the photo data as a memento.


Gerhilde
“Freeze, intruder.
Move, and I shoot.”
“Now, turn around to face me. Slowly.”
When I turned back as directed to look behind me, I saw that the one ordering me about was a very tall woman—about 180 centimeters tall. She had dark, upturned eyes with a sharp gleam in them. She was also holding a gun.

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NPC No. 55: “Really? Well, I’d better be going. If I don’t go pick some eggplants from the garden in time for dinner, your mom will tell me off.”

While I was glad to have quickly slipped away from the party for our victory over the terrorists, I still hadn’t been paid.

This left me a little shocked, but I could also see why there might have been a delay.

I doubted that the count was reluctant about paying us. He had to focus on resecuring his territory and getting the energy plant up and running again. Between dealing with military command and his government, things had to be pretty hectic for the count. He hadn’t seemed like the kind of person who would just ignore his commitment to pay us mercenaries either, so all I had to do was wait patiently.

What great timing. I guess I’ll take it easy for two or three days.

It was early afternoon when I finally got back to my apartment, but I decided to get to tidying it straightaway. There wasn’t any garbage, but dust had started to build up, and keeping my room clean just made me feel better.

When I was done with that, I had to go grocery shopping. I needed to buy food for dinner that night and breakfast the following morning. Plus, I had to buy more water, soft drinks, coffee, and rations to keep my ship stocked.

Whenever I went grocery shopping, I tended to hop onto one of the three-wheeled scooters fitted with baskets that residents of my apartment building could use freely and ride that to the nearby supermarket.

The supermarket in my neighborhood was part of the Gulminek Stores chain—a midsized one on the planet. It offered your typical services like droid home delivery, information about where their products came from, proxy shopping via remote-controlled droids, and register-free shopping via data money payments. These stores were popular for having an abundant variety of ready-made meals on offer—though recently, I’d been

buying mine from that butcher's shop in the Black Market Shopping District.

But it wasn't like the food here *wasn't* tasty.

Shopping here could be pretty fun and exciting. I always came to this store to stock up on things I needed, but sometimes, when I saw new products, I bought them out of curiosity. On the flip side, I'd end up feeling disheartened when my favorite items were no longer being carried.

After I finished buying the stuff I needed, I was about to leave when I noticed a small boy enter the store, holding hands with his parents.

When I saw them, I was suddenly reminded of my own family.

Since I had graduated from high school and become a mercenary, while I'd kept in touch with my parents and seen their faces on video calls, I hadn't actually seen them in person.

I did think about going to visit them, but since I'd failed to find any line of work apart from being a mercenary—which wasn't exactly the most respectable job—I didn't know what kind of things our neighbors in my hometown in the country would say about me behind my back. That was why so far, I'd stuck to sending my parents money and talking to them on the phone.

"Guess I'll call them…"

I stepped out into the supermarket's parking lot and tried phoning home on my Wrist-Com. Since the model I had could display images, I could see the face of the person I was calling.

My dad, Jack Ouzos, appeared on the screen. "Hello, this is Ouzos."

Unlike me, my dad was tall and thin. I had the unfounded notion that back when he'd still been employed at his company, he might have been popular with his female colleagues.

In contrast, my mother, Stella Ouzos, was on the short side. And though she wasn't exactly fat, I did think of her as plump. In other words, she was more like me.

"Hey, dad. Is now a good time?"

"What's up? Hardly ever hear from you."

I was seeing my dad for the first time in a while, and he looked as relaxed as ever.

Back when he had been working at his old company, he was always tired and nearly seemed possessed. And after he'd been blamed for someone else's screwup, I'd barely seen any signs of life in him.

However, since he'd quit that company and returned to his home planet of Tabul—which was neither too urban nor too rural—and started his own farm in the country, he'd become more relaxed. It was as if whatever specter that had possessed him had departed. That was probably because he'd done away with all kinds of constraints and responsibilities.

"I was just wondering about how you're going with your debt," I asked. "I'm pretty sure it'll be paid off soon."

"Yeah. After that last transfer you made, the remaining balance is about 1 million credits."

"Glad to hear it. My payment for a job I did the other day will be coming in soon, so let's use that to pay it off."

"I should be able to make enough to handle that amount myself. I just got done harvesting cabbages, so I've gotten some income from that," he said.

"Still, I'd like to pay for it. Wouldn't you like to take care of it sooner, even if it's only a day earlier?"

"I guess so. Okay, then. Thanks."

My father had only been saddled with this debt after having been framed. We had no idea if or when the creditors might make some other false accusations and increase the remaining debt.

To prevent that, some of my dad's more supportive colleagues had transferred the debt to a more upstanding bank that wouldn't listen to those kinds of demands. So while the chance of the creditors doing something was slim, we couldn't rule anything out. That was why it would definitely be better to finish paying off the debt as soon as possible.

And since my dad knew that too, he quietly bowed his head and accepted my suggestion.

"By the way, how's mom?"

"After she finished work for the afternoon, she went out to do some karaoke with some friends. She said she's on a 'karaoke diet.' She dragged me along one time...but it really wore me out."

Since my dad looked kind of embarrassed saying that, I tried changing the subject only for him to recount how aggressively chipper my mom had been with a sigh of resignation.

If the karaoke wore you out, doesn't that mean it was pretty effective?

"Sounds like mom hasn't changed a bit," I said.

While I was still reeling from the story of my mom's diet

journey, my dad brought up a topic that took me by surprise.

"How about you? Won't you at least try undergoing that slimming treatment?"

The treatment in question involved taking diet pills to force your body to burn fat, hence slimming you down. However, this resulted in a pretty high fever that would continue for about two days. Including the time it took for your skin to contract—because you'd have excess skin due to losing fat—the procedure meant you'd have to spend a week in the hospital. And while the treatment did cost a significant amount, it wasn't impossible to afford—even for commoners.

However, the problem was that it required hospitalization in the first place. That meant there was a high chance that any reservation made by a commoner could be stolen by a noble. There were even rumors of really nasty hospitals pocketing commoners' medical fees.

"I'm not thinking of getting any treatments right now."

After all, I have no interest in it.

"You really take after your mom in that respect."

"I wish I'd taken after you when it came to my height," I said.

Though my dad was about 180 centimeters tall, I was under 170 centimeters. I really would have liked to have been more like my dad in that regard.

"So, how are you doing?" he asked me.

"I'm all right. I try not to take on any jobs I can't handle."

"When I'm done paying off the debt, I'll give you a call. Come and visit us sometime. You don't need to worry about what our neighbors will say."

Apparently, my dad had realized I was worried about potential rumors.

I guess I can't get anything past him.

"Sure, when I've got the time."

"Really? Well, I'd better be going. If I don't go pick some eggplants from the garden in time for dinner, your mom will tell me off."

"I'm about to have dinner too, so I'll sign off."

With that, we both hung up.

I was sure that the vibe would have somehow been more awkward if I'd called him from home—it was right for me to have called him from the supermarket parking lot.

After I'd returned to my apartment and was eating the dinner I'd made myself, I received a video call from Gonzales. He usually never called.

Oddly enough, this was a reversal of our roles from the time I had called him just before I'd left to join the battle against the terrorists.

"Hey," said Gonzales. "Looks like you came back in one piece."

"Well, yeah. So, what's up?" I asked. "It's not often that you call me."

His expression didn't look too serious, so I guessed that he wasn't reaching out with news of some misfortune.

"Actually, I ran into Klus today. We both have the day off tomorrow, so we ended up talking about catching up. I thought it was about time you'd be getting back and decided to call," he explained. "So, how about it?"

I guess since becoming a mercenary, I've lost all sense of what day of the week it is.

"I just decided to take some time off myself, so I'm good to go."

"All right then, see you at ten o'clock tomorrow. We'll meet at the Playstar House in front of the station. I'll call Klus to let him know."

"Got it."

Though I'd either run into both of my old friends or would visit them in the course of my work often enough, this would be the first time in a while that all three of us had gotten together.

Incidentally, Playstar House was the name of an arcade we had used to go to all the time back when we had been students. They not only had analog cabinets with levers and buttons, but cabinets where you used your brainwaves to control the game. They also had some that used full-immersion VR. The games they offered ranged from the very latest titles to famous retro ones. The store was big, the atmosphere was cheerful, and since some of the staff were built like bodyguards, there were never any delinquents there. We were grateful to have such a place.

"Come to think of it, whatever happened with that conference you were at when I last called you?" I asked casually, remembering when I'd talked to Gonzales about trying to get some information before departing on my last mission.

"Listen, man... Seriously, I was sexually harassed from the moment I showed up to when I left!"

His tone was full of seething resentment—it sounded like the experience had really shaken him up.

He's always helping me out, so I guess I can let him complain from time to time.

NPC No. 56: “All right! After we have a light lunch, let’s head to Animember.”

I ended up listening to Gonzales’s complaints for a whole hour.

Well, usually I’m the one with gripes, so I guess I can listen to him every once in a while.

Luckily, neither Gonzales nor I drank alcohol, so we managed to wrap up our conversation before it had gotten too late.

It was now 9:55 a.m. the following morning, and I was standing outside the Playstar House in front of the station, waiting for Gonzales and Monsieur Klus.

Less than three minutes later, Gonzales arrived.

“Hey,” said Gonzales.

“’Sup.”

Today, he wore black pumps, a white blouse, and tight-fitting pants in a reddish color. Though he usually would have worn all this under a lab coat, he was wearing a brown overcoat instead.



“I see Klus hasn’t shown up yet,” he commented.

Moments before the clock struck ten, Klus finally arrived.

“Nice, right on time,” he said.

Klus was wearing sneakers, jeans, and a polo shirt. Over that was a whitish jacket with a vivid design on it—it featured a metal mask and gloves that were red and yellow in color. I felt like I’d seen it somewhere before, but couldn’t remember where.

“Right, first up, I’m gonna catch some figures of Shinogi Chouka and Mitsuki Kanmiji from *Demon Killer*!” Klus yelled.

“That was sudden!” interjected Gonzales.

Klus ignored him. “After that, as a believer in the Maias religion, I’ve gotta get my hands on the kimono-style dress version of the figure of Maiya from *Konsuba*!” he announced as he stepped inside the store and rushed toward the crane games.

Fifty minutes had passed, and after spending a total of 17,000 credits, Klus managed to acquire figures of Shinogi Kachou, Mitsuki Kanmiji, and Maiya in a kimono-style dress.

He had also acquired a figure of Malona Grescia, a character from the social upbringing simulation game *SpeedQueen! The Planet Racing*. An anime adaptation of the game’s story would be broadcast soon, and she had been picked as the protagonist. Anyway, this figure of her featured her victory party dress.

After that, for the first time in a while, we enjoyed some fighting games, racing games, and games where you collected medals. Once it was a little later than we’d usually have lunch, we left the store.

“Damn it! If I’d just managed to evade that one attack…”

“Señor Gon, you’ve got a lot to learn about timing your turns,” Klus said. “On that point, Monsieur Ouzos didn’t disappoint.”

“It’s usually life or death for me. But it’s kind of nice to be able to crash or get shot down without getting so much as a scratch.”

The last game we’d played, a dogfight game, had been Klus’s suggestion.

“All right! After we have a light lunch, let’s head to Animember.”

Back in our student days, whenever we’d gone to the arcade together, we’d carry on playing until well after midday in order to avoid the lunchtime rush. We’d made it our habit to turn up at a restaurant for lunch once the other diners had started to file out. For some reason, we’d ended up doing the same thing as grown

adults.

"Okay then, let's just eat wherever..."

As I said that, a location of a trendy chain café entered my field of vision. All three of our faces froze as we noticed it.

"Maybe not there," I said.

"Guess not."

"Not that one."

Back when we had been students, the three of us had once decided to go inside that trendy café. When we had been inside there, we'd gotten the feeling that the staff and the other customers were all glaring at us. It was as if they had wanted to say, *Otaku like you shouldn't even think about entering a trendy café like this!*

Of course, neither the staff nor the other customers had actually said anything. In fact, they hadn't even looked at us.

Looking back on that day, I think we had probably just been too self-conscious, but it had seemed real at the time.

However, just when we had been thinking about taking our food and going home, that jerk Arodich Ireblugas had come in with a flock of girls. He'd harassed us, saying, "Hey. Why are a bunch of introverts like you in this trendy café?"

Stuck with that unpleasant memory, we'd found that we couldn't enjoy that trendy chain anymore. We'd decided never to go near one of its stores ever again.

Their coffee was tasty, though.

For that reason, we ended up going to a familiar fast-food restaurant instead.

To an outside observer, I—an obvious otaku—was sitting with a man with metal all over his arms and face and a bespectacled beauty. Our unusual group must have stood out.

Especially Gonzales.

While he wouldn't have stood out in his original body, his appearance was really striking now.

Still, there's no way I'd give up on our friendship for a reason like that.

Once we'd all ordered our burgers and drinks and sat down, Klus spoke to me.

"By the way, Monsieur Ouzos. You joined that recent mission to pacify the terrorists on Planet Teura, right?"

"Sure did," I said. "I managed to survive somehow."

The battle had been reported by the news throughout the

empire, so it was to be expected that Klus had heard about it. And since I was a mercenary, it was only natural that he'd wonder if I'd taken part.

"So, did you manage to get a look at the Crimson Goddess? Maybe you even got to talk to her?" he asked.

I was expecting him to ask me something like "How much did it pay?" but instead, this man was brimming with curiosity and wanting to gossip about a gorgeous female mercenary. *That's my friend, all right.*

"I saw her and heard her over the radio, but I didn't get to talk to her in person. Like I'd have the chance."

"Figures…"

I simply told Klus the honest truth, and he readily accepted it.

Klus was just like me, so he wouldn't have been able to approach such a flashy character either. We understood each other very well in that respect.

While our heads were lowered, Gonzales brought up a different subject to Klus.

"By the way, how's your treatment going?"

He was asking about Klus's injuries. As someone who worked in health care, Gonzales had even introduced Klus to an ointment that was effective at treating keloid scars.

A serious expression came over Klus's face. "The truth is…"

He removed the glove covering his left arm.

Under it was his bare arm. His skin was flawless, and there wasn't even a single keloid scar to be seen.

"The day before yesterday, both of my arms fully healed!" he cried out in delight, and he proceeded to remove the glove on his right arm. That arm looked just as perfect as his left.

Though…since neither arm had been exposed to sunlight for years, they were both extremely pale.

"That's great! Congratulations!" I said.

"Why did you hide them, then?!" snapped Gonzales.

Still, we were both pleased to see that our friend's injuries had fully healed.

"Well… My face still hasn't fully healed, and there is still a possibility that I'll relapse," he explained. "Besides, I somehow don't feel comfortable unless I'm wearing them."

Apparently, he still hadn't made a full recovery and instead was in a transitional period of sorts. But even so, I was pleased to see that my friend's scarring had been reduced, even a little

bit.

“By the way, Señor Gon, when are you getting your old body back?” asked Klus. It looked like he was trying to shoot back at Gonzales for worrying about him.

Gonzales munched on a french fry. “To get it back, I have to prove it’s mine, so I’ll need all kinds of identification… And then there’s the cost on top of all that,” he muttered.

Whatever he says, he’s reaping what he sowed.

“You reap what you sow,” I then said out loud. “I mean, it’s your fault for buying a sterilization capsule meant to be used in medical facilities. And all because you don’t want to go back to your old body, despite your unpleasant experience at that conference.”

I thrust the reason Gonzales had once given me for not being able to reclaim his old body right back under his nose.

“That was a miscalculation,” he said. “The conference itself happens once a month and includes a seminar. Younger pharmacists are supposed to moderate them one time each in the first ten years after they obtain their licenses, and I thought I still had another year until my turn. But then several other pharmacists quit, died, or hit the ten-year mark, so my turn came sooner than I thought.”

Gonzales seemed to feel nothing but regret at the fact that the errors in his calculations had landed him in such a situation.

NPC No. 57: “Just the kind of answer I’d expect from you, Monsieur Ouzos.”

Once we finished lunch, we already knew where we’d go next.

“When are they gonna hurry up and release the data card of the *Noisy Planet* remake?”

“I keep telling you, it only just started airing—you can’t buy it yet. Anyway, they should have *Demon Killer: Dream District*, right?”

“When are the new volumes of *The Pirates Strawhat* and *Frierise: Beyond the End of the Road* coming out?”

We headed to the Mashitomo Building—that hallowed place for the planet’s otaku, crammed with all kinds of shops—to buy manga, novels, anime, and doujinshi.

All three of us rambled freely about our favorite anime and manga, and it was tons of fun. Though this might not have been acceptable behavior for working adults, we couldn’t help ourselves.

Animember had just been consigned to sell the latest doujinshi from Comic Festival, so making purchases from that lineup was our main objective.

Next, we strolled over to Seizaban, the secondhand shop in the same building, to see what bargain doujinshi we could unearth.

In the course of our otaku shop crawl that fundamentally involved nothing but shopping, we found we had frittered away four hours of the day. As a result, we all managed to get what we wanted, and as we left the Mashitomo Building with big grins on our faces, it was already evening. It was late enough that we could see people coming home from work, some of them stopping at places on the way for drinks.

No one in our trio drank alcohol, and we also wanted to get to reading the manga and novels we’d just bought. But as we headed to the nearest station so each of us could go home, we could hear a loud voice suddenly ring out behind us.

I turned to see a man of about forty standing on a beer crate, making a speech on the street corner with a shoulder-mounted speaker. There was a partition behind him with a number of

inspiring posters displayed on it. A few other men and women were handing out flyers nearby.

"What's their deal?" I murmured without thinking. I'd never seen such a scene before.

"That's a group trying to secure independence for their homeland—the empire invaded it," Klus explained. "It sounds like they're hoping to seize independence now during the reign of our fainthearted empress. If things go well, they even hope to destroy the empire."

I tried listening to the man's speech and found that Klus's description was right on the money.

"The current empress is faint of heart, so let us rise now and free our colonized nation while we still can," he protested.

"Sounds like they might attempt a coup d'état..."

I had only muttered that to myself as I listened to the speech, but Klus turned to me to ask what that would mean for me with an air of utmost seriousness.

"Won't that mean a payday for a mercenary like you?"

Indeed, from what the protestor had said, the probability of the group launching a coup d'état was extremely high. And it certainly would be an opportunity for mercenaries like me to cash in.

But I had a ready answer for Klus.

"Thanks, but I'd pass. I'd much rather take out petty pirates, escort cargo ships, or take part in nobles' minor squabbles," I said.

"Just the kind of answer I'd expect from you, Monsieur Ouzos."

Because of my occupation, there was still a chance that I would be conscripted in that kind of event. So, in his own way, Klus was probably expressing concern for me.

As I picked up a flyer that had fallen on the ground, Gonzales said something that floored me.

"They put up those same posters around my neighborhood..."

"Even *there*?" I asked.

"Of all the reckless things to do!" cried Klus.

Neither of us could help but blurt out our shock.

After all, we were talking about Gonzales's neighborhood—the Black Market Shopping District, home to purveyors of everything teenage edgelords sought. If posters having to do with famous companies or the government popped up there, they'd be torn down or ripped to shreds by the next day. The

edgelords thought they looked cooler that way—they practically ate posters for breakfast. And if you were *really* unlucky, they might even remake your posters in a more edgy (cringeworthy) style. However, the businesses behind the advertising had started to catch on to this fact and had recently started printing posters meant for that district in an edgy style from the get-go.

For example…

Energy drink → Bodily fluids from a demonic beast that allow your body to surpass its limitations.

Anyway, if these protestors had put up posters in the Black Market District, they had to be pretty gutsy guys.

"Well, the day after I spotted them, they were already overtaken by posters from that butcher's shop. 'See the cocoon of the sea beast descend, drowned in milky broth!' 'The crimson shell that breeds silence.' And, of course, 'The crimson shell that is not only endless, but eternal!'"

Yeah, I thought as much.

Judging from those descriptions, he was just advertising croquettes with creamed crab and shrimp.

That butcher really is always ahead of the curve. Next time I go to Gonzales's place, I might buy some just to see what they taste like.

While I might not agree with his approach to naming things, the croquettes there really are tasty.

The day after my thoroughly enjoyable day off, I headed to the Mercenaries Guild, intent on receiving my payment for the mission to defeat the terrorists.

I usually sent one-third of my pay home to help my dad pay off his debt, but this time, I would send half. That would therefore enable my dad to pay off the entirety of the debt he'd been unfairly saddled with—including the interest. The burden would finally be lifted from his shoulders.

"Your compensation for this mission comes to 4 million credits. Happy to take your payment in the usual way?" asked Old Man Lohnes.

However, something was odd about the amount of compensation I was slated to receive. Such a mission would usually pay between 2.5 and 3.5 million credits, so this was quite a bump.

"Are you sure? That doesn't seem like the right amount," I asked Lohnes, feeling concerned.

“Some of the expeditionary forces—or maybe it was the garrison troops—were a real pain in the ass, right? I guess this is their way of apologizing,” he explained. “Or you could call it a bribe to stop you from making too much fuss.”

“They ended up being court-martialed, so even if they asked us not to make a fuss, I think there’s only so much we can do,” I said.

“If they’re willing to cough up the money, I say take it. It wasn’t just one or two of them, so it’s not like you’ll be told to take the fall, right?”

The response Lohnes had come back with was so ambiguous that I wasn’t sure whether to keep worrying or just accept the outcome.

Well, this is Count Icolai we’re talking about. I’m sure he’s not the kind of guy to entrap mercenaries like us.

“Okay, well, I’ll take everything as data money this time. I’d also like to accept this other job,” I said, showing Lohnes a job description I’d just found to eliminate some petty pirates.

“You’re going back to work after a windfall like that? Hats off to you.”

“You never know when you might need some extra money.”

“So, you’d like to prioritize safety and take on those crummy pirates?”

After I received my payment and went through the necessary steps to take on my next mission—including getting the vital details on it—I left the guild and went to my usual bank branch to deposit half my pay into my dad’s account.

The Mercenaries Guild also had ATMs on its premises, but using an ATM there was tantamount to announcing that you had money. That could get you swarmed by mercs strapped for cash, so typically, no one used them. It had actually been suggested that the guild remove them, and the guild was considering it.

After running to the bank and returning to the guild, I hopped right into the Patchwork and took off on my mission to take out some pirates.

Incidentally, they were such small fry that even if I’d gone to Gonzales, I probably wouldn’t have learned anything. The details I had gotten from the guild were enough.

Still, I knew I couldn’t let my guard down.

NPC No. 58: “That will be 700 credits. Cash only.”

Half a day after my departure, I arrived in the sector where the small pirate band described in the mission request had been sighted. Since they’d been operating without straying far from this sector, their hideout was obviously somewhere in the vicinity.

After a quick sweep of the perimeter, I thought that asking around at a nearby service area would be a good idea.

When I had only spent about two hours in the sector, I came across an asteroid that looked like a hideout. I decided I would at least try hailing the people inside, but there was no response.

Looks like they’re out at work or something.

There wasn’t anywhere for me to hide in the vicinity of the asteroid, however, so after setting a tracker on it, I headed to the service area. It was possible that I might find them there, celebrating a job well done with a drink or two.

The closest service area to my position was a cluster orbiting Planet Lugo. Lugo was a gas planet that was a gorgeous pink color. But although it looked pretty, the temperature inside its atmosphere exceeded 240 degrees Celsius. And due to that same atmosphere’s acidic content, it was deemed far too dangerous to enter. Even so, it was considered a so-called photogenic planet and was orbited by many service areas.

Out of all of these, I thought the pirates were most likely to be found celebrating at the satellite that boasted itself as having the oldest bar inside—Service Area Conca.

It was easy to tell how old it was just from the paint peeling off of the walls here and there. With no amenities besides bathrooms, a restaurant-slash-bar, and an energy stand to charge up your vehicle, it was so simple that tourists didn’t come there. Instead, its typical clientele were ruffians, couriers, and mercenaries.

Consequently, it was easy for pirates to blend in there too. People tended to think that there’d be no way that pirates would stay so close to the more lively service areas in the cluster, but

that only made their camouflage efforts more successful.

Once I went inside, I saw people I took to be couriers or fellow mercs eating, drinking, and enjoying pointless conversations among themselves.

I took an empty seat in a corner of the restaurant. Once I was seated, a female android whose exterior was a patchwork of artificial skin and mechanical parts came to take my order.

“What would you like?” she asked.

She didn’t start off by welcoming me, nor was there even a hint of amiability in her voice. At least she had handed me the menu in an orderly fashion.

The menu listed options like burgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, fries, fried chicken, boiled sausages, mashed potatoes, mixed nuts, jerky, and pickles. All of those were either junk food or snacks that went well with booze, with every drink option—save for cola and water—being alcoholic as well. This was a menu that perfectly catered to space ruffians.

Of course, there were no options for serving sizes either.

Well, with a selection like this, I’m guessing the general public wouldn’t come here.

“I’ll have a burger, fries, and a cola.”

“Any alcohol?” she asked.

“I’ll have some later. I don’t believe in drinking while I’m eating,” I replied hastily. I suspected that if I were to admit that I didn’t drink at all, someone from a nearby table might pick a fight with me.

As soon as I’d told the waitress my order, she swiftly withdrew to the kitchen with no further acknowledgment.

While I waited for my meal, I looked around the restaurant. Though there were some people enjoying a celebratory drink here, my targets were nowhere to be seen.

A little while later, my order was set down on my table without so much as a “Thank you for your patience.”

“That will be 700 credits. Cash only,” said the waitress, demanding payment without a hint of cordiality in her voice.

Considering their clientele, they would probably see a lot of customers dine and dash if they let people pay at the door after eating. It made sense that they’d adopted this system.

When I handed the waitress a thousand-credit coin, she reached into a leather pochette she wore on her waist.

“Your change—300 credits,” she said, holding it out.

Though I reached out to accept my change, she didn't drop it into my waiting hand. Instead, she shot me more than one expectant glance.

Ah, I get it.

"Please, keep the change…"

"Oh, can I? Thank you!" she replied in a singsong voice.

Now that I understood her intentions and let her keep her change, she gave me a smile for the first time since I had arrived. She spoke sweetly as she stuffed the coins into her pocket and then walked away from my table.

At first, I had taken her for an android, but now I realized that she might actually be a human with cybernetic limbs.

With that settled, I decided I might as well eat what I'd ordered. The burger and fries were both of surprisingly high quality. If I hadn't found the vibe of the restaurant, its clientele, and its staff so objectionable, I actually might have chosen to come and eat here again.

It was while I was enjoying my meal that a pair of obviously rough—though manifestly petty—customers came into the restaurant. One of them was tall, while the other was short. They were what one might call a mismatched duo.

And there was no doubt in my mind that they were the petty pirates I was searching for.

After all, these two took every opportunity to show their faces to their victims via comms screens. They'd introduce themselves as the Hans Brothers and broadcast their ferocity far and wide.

Consequently, the documents I'd received from the guild had included crystal clear photographs of their faces too.

Of course, there had been a possibility that since they had deliberately shown their faces, they might've changed their appearances, but I could see that they still looked exactly the same now.

The Hans Brothers sat down two tables away from me and hurled unspeakably rude words at the listless waitress who had taken my order earlier.

"Bring us two servings of beer, sausages, and chicken! Hurry up, toots! If you don't hurry up, I'll have to smack that butt of yours!"

"But if we Hans Brothers take a liking to ya, we'll make ya feel good!" the other yelled. "We got plenty of money!"

Judging from what they'd said, it sounded like they'd just

come back from another job. Having no means of detecting that I was listening in, they continued to carelessly brag about their exploits.

While I could have attacked them and detained them there and then, that would have inconvenienced everyone else in the restaurant. Plus, something about that waitress really scared me, so I decided to sit tight instead.

It wasn't long before the waitress in question brought the pirates their meals.

"That will be 12,900 credits. Cash only."

The price she had demanded was absurd.

Each medium glass of beer was 500 credits. A single plate of fried chicken—which was just six pieces—cost 900 credits. And a plate of five boiled sausages should've cost 750 credits.

Given that they had ordered two servings of each of those, their total should've only come to 4,300 credits. The 12,900 credits she'd asked for were precisely three times that.

The men's flagrant rudeness had no doubt hit a nerve—the waitress's expression was one of palpable displeasure.

Of course, there was no way the Hans Brothers would take the waitress's attitude lying down.

"No way beer, sausages, and chicken for two come to *that* much!"

"Don't screw with us, you bitch! Do you want us to teach ya a lesson?!"

Though the two Hans Brothers looked kind of tough, as I'd said initially, they were more or less a pair of petty thugs. Nobody who was used to fighting would find them the least bit frightening.

"That price includes compensation for *my* troubles! Now cough it up!" cried the waitress. She cracked her knuckles to boot. She was clearly used to being rough and wasn't intimidated in the slightest.

Instead, *she* was the intimidating one here—even I felt a little overwhelmed by her. She was so formidable that I even noticed other customers starting to tremble.

Maybe she doubles as a bouncer here?

"D-Damn it! Looks like we picked the wrong joint to come and celebrate at! Let's go home!"

"What a shame! You could have made more money than you'd know what to do with!"

Though they continued to talk a big game, the Hans Brothers were clearly no match for the formidable waitress. They left the restaurant in a hurry.

I immediately wolfed down what was left of my burger and cola, slipped a thousand-credit coin under my burger plate to make up for the alcohol I was expected to have ordered, and exited the restaurant to follow the Hans Brothers.

I did that in order to confirm that the asteroid I'd passed really was their hideout and to make sure that no one else would stand in my way when I went to apprehend them either.

NPC No. 59: “Yeah. I’ve already accepted that I’ll never have luck with women, so can you give it a rest? Alternatively, I could just shoot you down.”

I somehow managed to attach a tracking beacon to the Hans Brothers’ ship, which was a cream-colored spaceship that looked like two cones stuck together. Once they left the service area, I followed them at a distance.

As luck would have it, they made no further stops on their way back to their asteroid.

I waited for the moment they dropped their speed so they could land on the asteroid. That was when I fired my beam cannon, hoping to destroy their thruster nozzles.

However, just as my beam was about to hit them, their craft suddenly moved. Ultimately, I missed, and the pair’s engines immediately roared as they attempted to escape.

This is probably pointless, but I guess I’ll try hailing them.

“I can see you’re the pirates known as the Hans Brothers! You’d better come quietly!” I said.

“Screw you! And yeah, we’re the Hans Brothers! Everyone fears us! What self-respecting pirate would let himself get caught by a dork like you?!”

“Guys like us can just wait for ladies to approach us. Of course, a dweeb like you will never know what that’s like!”

Since I’d hailed them with my video feed on, not only could the other guys see my nerdy face, but I could see the mismatched duo in their spiky outfits too. They were laughing vulgarly and obviously just boasting despite being deemed a mere Pawn-rank target by guild standards.

“Yeah. I’ve already accepted that I’ll never have luck with women, so can you give it a rest? Alternatively, I could just shoot you down.”

“If you think you can, go ahead and try!”

All right, I’ll do just that.

But they dodged my next shot too, just like they had when they’d come alongside the asteroid.

“You bastard! Don’t you know that’s dangerous?!”

“Weren’t you the one who told me to take the shot?!” I said.

“Haven’t you seen what an awesome pilot my big bro is? He just dodged your beam in the middle of a sneeze!”

Ah, I see what’s happening.

Somehow, we were finding some common ground here. I was starting to feel sympathetic to these guys, but I knew I still had to capture them.

“All right, then I suppose I just need to keep shooting till I hit you.”

I fired my beams at them several times, thinking one of my shots was bound to hit, but they dodged them all.

“Whoa! Hey! Cut that out, dammit!”

The brothers then fled at full throttle.

It turned out their ship was just a little faster than mine, so it was all I could do just to keep up. While I occasionally took aim at their thruster nozzles and fired my beams again—partly just to constrain them—they deftly dodged these too, though that was probably luck.

After tailing them for about thirty minutes, I had my finger on the trigger again, thinking, *This time, I know I’ll hit them.* But the moment I pulled the trigger, the wreck of a midsized battlecraft—a so-called cruiser—drifted between me and my target. My beams hit the wreck instead.

As I dropped my speed and changed direction, trying to avoid a collision, the pirates were able to put some distance between themselves and me.

I quickly evaded the shipwreck and headed in the direction they’d fled. But after flying for five more minutes, something terrible happened.

For some reason, I bumped into an entire squadron of ships.

“You there, in the light battlecraft! The space beyond this point is under the exclusive jurisdiction of His Grace, Duke Altishult Bingil Orvorus! If you proceed any further, you will be eliminated as an illegal trespasser!”

Well, I have no way of winning that fight. I cut my main engine and brought my ship to a stop.

“I am a member of the Mercenaries Guild. I am currently pursuing some pirates, and there is a possibility they have entered the duke’s territory,” I said.

“We have received no reports from anyone having seen them.

If they are found, we'll be the ones to deal with them."

The one addressing me was a middle-aged man—obviously a nobleman—who was probably the commander of the squadron. He was also glaring at me as if I were covered in dirt.

Well, there's no need to get worked up about something so insignificant.

"Understood," I said. "Well, if you are able to capture or sink their ship, I'd be grateful if you could report that to the police or the Mercenaries Guild. Also, if you need any information about the pirates, I'd be happy to give it to you."

"All right. Hand it over."

Once the data was transferred, the man said, "Right. That'll be all. Hurry up and leave." He then waved me off, almost like he was shooing a dog away.

"Yes, sir. Please excuse me."

Somehow, I got away in one piece.

I don't suppose there's any chance of the Hans Brothers being the duke's henchmen? If so, this was all handled really poorly.

Although...supposing that they were acting on the duke's orders, I'm sure he'd still sacrifice them without a second thought. But I guess I'd better not pursue this any further.

For now, I guess I'll contact the guild and have them buy that asteroid info.

"Hello. This is Lohnes of the Ittsu Branch of the Mercenaries Guild."

"Ah, hello there. It's John, Knight rank. The thing is, I was tailing the Hans Brothers, but then they fled inside territory under Duke Altishult Bingil Orvorus's jurisdiction. It's impossible to continue my pursuit."

"The duke's territory? Hang on a minute. You aren't saying that those small fry are connected to the duke, are you?" he asked.

"I wouldn't go that far, but it was one of His Grace's personal squadrons who blocked my way. I obediently turned back."

"If you'd been really unlucky and complained, your life might have been in danger. A wise decision."

"The mission was a failure, but I did find out where their hideout is, so I'm hoping I can sell it to you guys. Here are the coordinates."

"Got it. Take care on your way home."

"Yessir."

I wasn't able to complete the mission, but given the duke's intervention, there was nothing to be done, and I wouldn't be penalized. And if I could get the guild to buy their asteroid off me, I'd still make a tidy sum out of it.

However...the moment after I ended my call with Lohnes, my ship's danger alarm sounded.

I hurriedly veered to one side, and a beam missed my ship's hull by a hair.

When I checked the source of the beam with my multi-camera array, I saw two G-22 battlecraft—they were Bastes, manufactured by the Grantros Corporation.

Both ships had a white base coat and an emblem of a dog's face painted in purple on the hull. The two were distinguishable from each other as one had red edging and the other had blue.

These two obviously weren't the Hans Brothers, but I couldn't say for certain whether they weren't hit men who'd been sent by the House of Duke Orvorus to shut me up.

While I was still wondering about that, the two ships kept exchanging positions, darting up, down, left, and right. They continued these aerobatic maneuvers as they bore down on me, intermittently firing their beam cannons.

The pilots must've had some serious skills to pull off feats like these.

You've gotta be kidding me!

I'm not in the duke's territory, and I don't recall seeing anything incriminating—no way am I letting myself get killed here!

For now, the one course of action open to me was to flee to the pirates' asteroid hideout. If I could just get that far, the ship sent by the guild to pick it up might already be there.

But these guys don't look like they'd let me get away. And after chasing the Hans Brothers, I'm also running low on fuel.

That being the case, it was going to be safest to leave after rendering them immobile.

Easier said than done, though.

Their beams came at me like a hailstorm, and as their trajectories repeatedly separated and intersected, I found it really hard to predict where they'd go next.

I'd somehow managed to dodge their attacks up till this point, but if this carried on much longer, I'd be running on empty.

The two ships suddenly split up again and accelerated, one going left and the other right.

It felt like they were about to attempt a pincer strike. I immediately rolled my ship to the right, pulled up the nose, blasted a thruster located on the bottom of my ship for a split second, and killed my main booster. By executing all these steps simultaneously, I was pulling off my Shot-Down Fake-Out. I ended up facing right—the direction the blue ship had darted—and fired my beam at its approximate location.

I was only hoping to ward the pilot off and break up their pincer attack, but since the blue ship had coincidentally decided to turn at that very moment, I ended up hitting its hull and a thruster nozzle. Unable to complete the turn, the blue ship carried on at its present bearing instead.

The red ship had just completed a sweeping maneuver of its own. I just barely managed to get behind it and was able to destroy its thruster nozzles.

Just before I could issue a demand for their surrender, capsule-shaped objects emerged from the cockpits of the two ships and shot at breakneck speeds in the opposite direction from the asteroid I'd tried to head toward.

Apparently, their ships had been equipped with high-velocity ejector escape capsules. I remembered seeing that model being pretty pricey.

At any rate, I had escaped mortal peril.

I decided to tow the two ships home with me, both to serve as evidence and as the spoils of battle.

I'm pretty sure I brought a rope and a hook here...

I always wore a space suit when flying my ship, and it came in handy today as it meant I didn't need to spend time changing when I wanted to work outside the ship.

By the way, the only reason I had been able to get away was because the red ship had left itself open to go and help the blue one after I'd blasted it. Thanks to that pilot's decision, I had just barely managed to survive.

NPC No. 60: “Wouldn’t you expect me to smash them to smithereens?!”

After selling off the asteroid and the battlecraft, I went home and instantly fell into a deep sleep.

Later, I couldn’t help but wonder...

I heeded the warning about the duke’s territory and immediately turned back. I really didn’t see anything, so why did they attack me?

I can’t help but feel like something shady is going on.

And while I don’t know for sure that those pilots were hit men sent by the duke, the chances seem exceedingly high.

Either way, I was sure that nothing good would come out of the likes of me sticking my nose into it. Provided they didn’t attack me again, I would leave well enough alone.

A protagonist could have courageously stood up to the duke, but an NPC like me would be killed in an instant for rushing in like that.

In any case, the guild would finish assessing my spoils by tomorrow. Once I received my compensation, perhaps I’d go to Animember to buy some new releases or doujinshi.

The next day came, and while I still hadn’t completely shaken off my fatigue, I found myself at the guild all the same.

“Tired, huh?”

“This is what it looks like when you get attacked for no apparent reason,” I said.

I had asked Old Man Lohnes to take care of the procedure for me, just like always.

“At any rate, the mission itself is null and void. After selling off the modified asteroid and two Grantros Corporation G-22 Bastes ships you captured, this is what you stand to make.”

Lohnes showed me the details. The asteroid, which had been modified to contain a building, was worth 3.41 million credits. Each Bastes craft—which was a very popular model despite not being one of the main vessels used by imperial forces—was worth 4.07 million credits.

In total, my spoils came to 11.55 million credits.

Carrying that much cash would really scare me, I thought. *To be safe, I guess I'll take it all in data money.*

"All right, I'd like the full amount as data money," I said.

"Got it. But you know, you really scored big this time."

"I've got the exhaustion to show for it..."

As we discussed this, a loud voice suddenly rang out from one of the seats next to me.

"Wait a minute! Why is some jerk who failed a pirate hunt getting paid that much?"

When I looked in the direction of the outburst, I saw a gorgeous girl who was a little younger than me. She had long pink hair tied up in a ponytail. The girl was looking at me through the partition between our reception desks.

Her objections were followed by the voice of Alphonse Zaystall, who was manning the desk next to us.

"Although the gentleman next to you was unable to capture the pirates themselves, he *was* able to seize an asteroid converted into a building that the pirates were using as a hideout, along with two Bastes battlecraft that attacked him on his way back. His payout is merely the price of the goods he has sold us rather than payment for the mission," Zaystall explained. "Besides, his mission was not a failure, but was rather deemed null and void. The pirates were shot down by Duke Orvorus's private forces, and both the police and the Mercenaries Guild received their report that they recovered the pirates' bodies. And more to the point, please be seated. I must tell you that your behavior is a complete breach of etiquette."

Judging from Zaystall's voice, he was getting angry.

However, the pink lady did not return to her seat. Instead, she proceeded to protest.

"I do understand the circumstances of the mission. But the last time I *tidied up* some pirates, you wouldn't buy their ships from me!"

Ah. You just emphasized the words tidied up*, didn't ya?*

"In your case, the pirates' ships were reduced to nothing but scrap," Zaystall said. "We were unable to accept that sale."

"Wouldn't you expect me to smash them to smithereens?!"

"When you do, it makes it impossible to buy what's left."

"Grrr..." A frustrated expression came over the pink lady's face in response to Zaystall's explanation. Then she glared at me again and started to shower me with abuse. "How dare scum like

you, somebody who can't even handle a simple pirate hunt, take such a hefty payment?! The Bastes fighters were probably just sitting at the pirates' hideout anyway!"

Not only had she peeked at another merc's private documents, but now, having only just met me, she'd started calling me scum.

To be perfectly honest, I found her rude beyond words.

And she'll definitely be a nuisance, without question!

As expected, she then continued to bombard me with lines that made me want to question just which one of us was the scum here.

"I know! Hey, scumbag! Give me the Bastes fighters! As a former mainline model of the imperial army, it would only be appropriate for *me* to pilot one!"

"Sorry, but that won't be possible," Old Man Lohnes cut in, sounding clearly exasperated. "The guild has already purchased those ships, so he no longer has them. Besides, until the parts that were damaged are repaired, they won't be usable."

"Then *you* can buy them back!" she snapped at me. "And once you've got them back in perfect working order, give them to me!"

Everything she was saying lacked any semblance of common sense.

Once again, we heard Zaystall's voice. It was calm yet still unquestionably angry. "Miss Ako Shandela, that is an obvious attempt at extortion. If you do not cease and desist this instant, you will be reported to the police and arrested. Need I add that you will not only be stripped of your guild license but you'll likely be thrown straight in jail?"

Alphonse Zaystall had initially gained popularity as a capable yet beautiful seemingly female receptionist. But in addition to his martial arts prowess, he also showed no mercy toward mercenaries who shirked their responsibilities or caused problems in the guild. He'd earned himself the nickname "the Princess of Order."

Perhaps intimidated by Zaystall's intensity, the pink lady who had so readily forced her unreasonable demands on me obediently sat back down in her chair.

"A-Anyway, hurry up and give me my pay!" she said. "And I want an application form for a promotion exam!"

Still frightened by Zaystall's intensity, she glared at me for a moment and hastily left the reception hall since she'd gotten

what she'd come here for.

Old Man Lohnes, Zaystall, and I all shared a heavy sigh.

"Hey. Why didn't you stand up for yourself? There's no question that you shot down those Bastes fighters yourself," said Lohnes.

"That lady is the same type as Yuri Puliliera, so there's no way she'd listen to me," I said, thinking of Mr. Hero. "I'm just glad she didn't sucker punch me."

"She thought about doing worse," Lohnes said.

While Lohnes and I were still reeling from the shock of dealing with the pink lady, Zaystall interjected.

"That's not all," he said. "She's always been a bit of a troublemaker..."



“Did something happen between you two?”

“Well, you’ve seen her attitude and how she behaves, but did you notice how she took an application form for the promotion exam with her? She hasn’t met the requirements for promotion yet.”

The exam was for promotion within the guild’s ranking—in other words, she was trying to rise up to Bishop rank.

There were two requirements one had to meet to take this exam.

1. To be Knight rank.

Well, that much is obvious.

2. To have completed at least ten missions from each of the following categories: Combat, Elimination, Escort, and Security. Failed or voided missions do not count toward this total.

“Combat” referred to participating in what I would call squabbles between opposing nobles. Elimination missions were ones involving pirates or overeager terrorists who needed to be captured or driven out of a place.

When there were no combat missions or pirate hunts available (or if they were just in short supply), one had to make use of a particular clause in the Mercenaries Guild charter and complete a whole lot of escort and security missions instead.

That clause read: “A mercenary registered with the Mercenaries Guild is required to accept, at minimum, four mission requests that are guaranteed to involve combat (armed conflicts between military powers, neutralizing pirates, etc.) per year. Missions where combat arises unexpectedly will also be counted toward this total. However, missions that should be guaranteed to involve combat (armed conflicts between military powers, neutralizing pirates, etc.) but unexpectedly do not lead to the mercenary’s participation in battle will not count toward this total.”

Incidentally, progression from Knight to Bishop rank was the only promotion that required an exam. To rise from Bishop to Queen rank, one could advance through one’s achievements alone.

To get to King rank, one not only needed to be Queen rank first, but you needed to get approval from the guild grandmaster at guild headquarters and at least three other guildmasters. You also needed to pass a review of one’s achievements as reported to the guild and pass a background check. Finally, after passing

an interview with a panel of six guildmasters that included the grandmaster, you could finally advance to King rank.

"Really?" I asked. "Looks to me like she'd be more than qualified."

"She *had* reached Knight rank, but she has refused to take even one mission in the Escort or Security categories, claiming 'Those jobs are for morons!' So, I keep telling her she isn't qualified to take the exam, but she keeps applying anyway."

After explaining that, Zaystall let out another, even heavier sigh.

It was one thing when someone like Lambert Reargraz (aka Mr. Cocky) recorded incredible achievements and received a recommendation from the higher-ups—but typically, the guild wouldn't permit those without these credentials to take the exam.

From Bishop rank onwards, if anything, Escort and Security missions were offered most frequently, but it appeared that Ako Shandelar didn't understand that.

"What a difficult person… Well, you'll have to excuse me," I said.

To be perfectly honest, there was nothing I could do about this woman, and her issues had nothing to do with me.

If she comes demanding money or goods from me again, I'll report her to the police right away.

"All right. Take care."

"I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

After Old Man Lohnes and Zaystall bid me farewell, I left the Mercenaries Guild, taking care not to be noticed by the pink lady again.

Now then, I guess I'll go to Animember and blow off some steam!

☆☆☆

Aside: Ako Shandelar

Who does that woman think she is?!

And after I heard she was a good worker and was kind enough to go to her too! Talk about ungrateful.

And I was even thoughtful enough to allow that dork to present his money and ships to me!

Anyway, why can't I move up to Bishop rank already?! Usually, someone as talented as me is supposed to skip a grade to move up

to Bishop rank. Why hasn't that happened?! It must be because that damned empress is envious of me and wants to hold me back!

Anyway, this place sure is slow. How long does it take to make one cup of coffee?!

"Thank you for waiting."

"Too late!" I said.

"Eek!"

Before the commoner waitress could set the coffee cup down on the table, I swept it out of her hands. What did I care that the coffee ended up smashed on the floor?

"If all you've got to do is make one coffee, then bring it out right away! This is why I can't *stand* the cafés commoners go to!" I complained.

I'd heard that this place—Landitt Coffee—was high-end among the cafés that commoners visited, but at the end of the day, I guess they were only plebs.

"P-Please forgive me," the waitress said. "But we didn't even take two minutes to serve you..."

"Don't talk back; you're just a commoner!"

A waitress and a lowly commoner—how dare she argue with me?!

I stood up from my chair and drew my pistol with the intent of shooting the commoner waitress through the leg. But the very next moment, heaven and earth spun around, and I felt my back being slammed against the floor.

"Oof!"

My pistol was wrested from my grasp, and now, the barrel had been turned to point at me.

"That's enough," I heard someone say. "If you continue to struggle, I'll show you no mercy."

"Fialka Tielsad..."

The one who threw me to the floor, took my gun, and was now pointing it at me was Fialka Tielsad, of the House of Viscount Tielsad. She, who, despite becoming a mercenary at the same time as me, had at some point overtaken me in the rankings and was already a Bishop.

"Can't you even wait one moment to be served?"

"It's that waitress's fault for being so slow!"

"Really?" she said. "From where I was sitting, it looked like she took under two minutes. And besides, I think you know that except in cases of emergency, it's illegal to draw a firearm in town."

“Nobles are an exception!”

“*Even* for nobles. You must be aware of the laws introduced by the previous emperor.”

“Should I be? You must be out of your mind if you expect me to obey such terrible laws!” I yelled.

How infuriating.

Thanks to the stupid laws introduced by that woman and her daddy, we nobles can’t even live like nobles anymore. That’s why my father, once a baron, ended up facing trumped-up charges from the government and lost his position!



Next, an android in a maid's uniform stepped out from behind Tielsad. "Milady, this lady is no longer a noble. Baron Shandera was stripped of his title three years ago."

What the maid had said to Tielsad was information that would have been better left unsaid. And I could only read the android's expression as one of scorn, directed at me.

How dare she?! Why should I have to suffer this much humiliation?!

Not only was I thrown to the ground in front of other people, but my gun was stolen and pointed at me!

How dare *she?! I swear I'll make her pay!*

But right now, I have to get my firearm back and prepare to counterattack…

"All right. I won't cause any more trouble, so can you give my gun back?"

"Any funny business, and I won't show any mercy."

"I know…"

Once I saw that Tielsad and her android had stepped back, I rose to my feet.

Tielsad then offered me my gun back. The moment I got it again, I began to pull the trigger.

"Have you forgotten my mistress's warning? 'Any funny business, and I won't show any mercy'?"

The android was standing right next to me. Her hand was on top of mine—the one I'd reached out for my gun with. I bet that if I were to carry on and try to pull the trigger, she would certainly crush my hand first.

I had no choice but to take my gun and meekly return it to its holster.

"Make sure you pay your bill, and pay for the cup you smashed before leaving too. And apologize to the waitress."

This pisses me off! What's a woman like this doing above me in title and rank?!

The title's one thing, but I really don't like the fact that my rank as a mercenary is lower than hers…

After glaring at Tielsad and her doll-like android, I paid for the coffee and what I'd broken. With that done, I left the café.

"Hold on! Apologize to her first!"

I could hear Tielsad wailing about something behind me, but I didn't care.

She really irks me. I wonder if any luck will come my way…

NPC No. 61: “You see, it’s precisely at times like this one that some of the more imbecilic figures in power might panic, go overboard, and bring about their own downfall.”

☆☆☆

Aside: Third-Person Perspective

The planet of Tannemut—an inhabited world owned by Duke Altishult Bingil Orvorus.

In a certain location on the planet sat the duke’s estate, and in a corner of that estate was a vast greenhouse. As an elderly man sprinkled water on the potted plants in that greenhouse with a watering can, another man—sharply dressed, in the manner of a butler—stepped forward to address him.

“Your Grace. I have news to report.”

“What is it?” the duke responded as he continued to water his plants.

“It pertains to the two men we captured some hours ago. They were simply pirates, just as the documents we received from the mercenary who arrived first on the scene claimed. We are to receive a reward from the police via the Mercenaries Guild.”

“Oh? If so, that means that mercenary really was only pursuing them when he entered my territory… In that case, I guess we committed a rather regrettable blunder.”

“The *Hounds* we released as part of that blunder have returned after being shot down in combat. They say they had to leave their craft behind.”

“So that mercenary managed to take *them* down without killing them… Sounds like he’s quite adept.”

Having finished watering his plants, the duke went to return the watering can to its place.

“What do you wish to do with him?” asked the butler.

“Leave him be,” the duke said. “Do nothing. From his point of

view, the pirates he was chasing were stopped by my security forces after entering my territory. He decided to leave it to my guards to deal with them and withdrew. He had a perfectly sensible reason to do so, and we have given nothing but sensible reasons for our actions as well. We told him not to cross the borders of the duchy without permission and that we'd deal with the thieves ourselves. Once we hand the pirates we caught over to the police, he'll simply marvel at how swiftly my security forces handled everything. End of story."

After setting his watering can back down on a shelf, the duke sat down at a table set for tea and poured himself a cup.

"You see, it's precisely at times like this one that some of the more imbecilic figures in power might panic, go overboard, and bring about their own downfall." The duke paused to take a sip of the tea he had brewed for himself. "If I were to allow myself to be overcome by suspicion and direct my subordinates to pursue him—especially since the opponent in question shows no sign of doubting the motives behind what were, after all, commonplace actions—wouldn't that be tantamount to confessing my own duplicity? I'll only repeat myself this one time. Do nothing."

Though he had maintained a placid tone of voice during this entire speech, his final words had been forceful.

"Very well, my lord," the butler said. "I shall tell the Hounds the same thing."

"They're good hounds, and a hound who goes on the hunt when told is guilty of no crime. But as for the commander of my guard, the one who sent my Hounds on a hunt without permission… See that he's *replaced* by tomorrow morning."

"Very well, my lord."

The butler bowed deeply as the duke peacefully sipped his tea.

☆☆☆

Aside: The Hounds

"Damn it!"

The sound of a helmet being thrown to the floor echoed in a servants' dormitory on Duke Orvorus's estate.

"Big sis, I'm so sorry. It's my fault…"

"It wasn't your fault… Our opponent was just a better pilot than us."

Two individuals wearing space pilot suits sat on their beds as they hung their heads in dismay. The two girls looked to be in their late teens.

“I can’t believe he even had enough time to react… Next time, I swear I’ll shoot him down.”

“That might be hard.”

“But why, big sis?!”

“He probably went easy on us. I bet he intended to interrogate us after hamstringing our ships.”

She gasped. “Oh!”

The one who had called the other “big sis”—the younger sister—bit down on her thumbnail as she cried out imprecations. Her older sister reproached her in return. But after registering the shock from the point the older sister had made, she bit down on her nail even harder.

“We’ll just have to up our game so we can win next time, won’t we?” the older sister said.

“Big sis, you’re right!”

With that, the two sisters made a firm resolution.

“I can’t help but wonder, though… Just what kind of guy were we dealing with, since fighting us seemed to be child’s play for him? A fresh-faced pretty boy?! A handsome older dandy?! He might even have been a cute cross-dressing boy!”

“Big sis…”

Mere moments after they’d resolved to vanquish their foe, the older sister’s fickle heart had changed gears, and she was now fantasizing about him. Her train of thought veering off the tracks was leaving her younger sister with a headache.

“You could easily find out if you asked the security forces to show you their video logs, right? And you realize he might turn out to have been a stocky, brawny macho man, a chubby nerd, or a narcissistic jerk, yeah?”

“Oh, you’re just saying that to upset me!”

The two bickering sisters—with the older one fantasizing about the man who had defeated them while the younger one remained focused on reality—showed no sign of moving on anytime soon.

★★★

I’d headed to Animember to wipe away the memory of the

abuse I'd suffered at the Mercenaries Guild. There, I snagged the latest volumes of a number of series, including *Ultimate Load*, *Line Cook in Labyrinth*, *The Omori Family's Drag King Butler*, *The Pharmacist Mutterings,* and *Bakemonobanashi: Comic Edition*.

Then, at Seizaban, I managed to find the novelization of *The Standard Septuplets*, something I'd been itching to get my hands on. I also bought some doujinshi for the popular game series *Creature Hunter*.

But as I merrily made my way home, that same pink-haired lady—Ako Shandela, I think her name was—appeared in front of me.

"Well, fancy seeing you here! I guess God is on *my* side!" she said, grinning even as she glared at me. Then, even though we were both standing in the middle of the street, she pointed her gun at me.

This act provoked gasps from the people around us.

What does *she think she's doing? With this many people around—who can also see that I didn't attack her—why would she pull out her gun?*

Regardless, I raised both my hands to show I had no intention of fighting back.

"What on earth do you want with me?" I asked.

"I already told you, didn't I? Buy those Bastes fighters back from the Guild, repair them, and present them to me!" she yelled. "Oh, and while we're at it, I wouldn't mind a brand new G-32 Dilita from the Maxborg Corporation, or maybe a G-42 Rassjalt from the Jelmakin Romiks Corporation!"

After barking out the same orders she'd given me at the Mercenaries Guild, she added some even loftier demands.

By the way, both of the models she'd added to her demands were mainline battlecraft used by the imperial military! Did she even know that both of those models cost over 10 million credits apiece?

Of course, I rejected her demands without a second thought. "I'm afraid I must refuse. Why should I have to do such a thing in the first place?"

"Surely it's only natural for the likes of you to have the fruits of your labor used by one of the chosen few—someone like me?" she asserted calmly.

Frankly, there was something off about her.

How can she make these demands without hesitation when we've

only just met?

Though I had my own suspicions about that, at any rate, there was only one thing to be done about her. Using my Wrist-Com, I made a call.

"Ah, hello, is this the police? I'm in front of a multi-tenant building called the Bazun Building in Block 65. A strange woman is threatening me. Can you come right away?"

I had a model of Wrist-Com that could display a video feed of whoever I was calling, so the face of the female police operator was clearly visible.

From the image on my screen and the topic of my conversation with her, my assailant was apparently able to tell that I had not in fact made this call to buy her a battlecraft but had contacted a police officer instead.

"Hold on!" Ako yelled. "Why are you reporting me to the police?! Hang up at once!"

"Well, that's the situation, so please come as quickly as poss __"

Bang!

Before I could hang up the phone, she shot the ground at my feet with her pistol.

"I'm asking you... What do you think you're doing, reporting *me* to the police?! Answer me, now!"

How can she make these demands without hesitation when we've only just met? That was what I'd asked myself moments earlier, but it looked like I had my answer now. It was probably because she was a noblewoman.

Moreover, if she belonged to one of the anti-imperial factions of nobles—those who hated the current empress and argued that they should be allowed to live "more like nobles"—then I could understand her words and actions.

But if she *was* a noblewoman, then she must've had a certain degree of power and financial backing. And if she was only working as a mercenary for fun, then she surely would only have to pester her parents if she wanted a Bastes of her own.

Considering all that... She had probably come from a noble house that had gone bankrupt. The other option was that maybe her father had been stripped of his title altogether and they were no longer nobles.

In any case, there was no way I was letting myself get shot. I gave her the answer she sought instead.

“Well, however one looks at it, what you’re doing is a crime, isn’t it?” I asked. “Of course I’d report you.”

“Huh? Why is it a crime for a noble like me to simply ask you, a lowly commoner, to present me with a brand new battlecraft?!”

“By imperial decree, the previous emperor put in place a law to stop nobles doing that kind of thing, and our current empress continues to enforce it. Don’t you know that?”

“There’s no need for me to obey that woman’s orders!” she shouted back.

So she is *a noble after all, and she seems to have had some kind of relationship—or is at least acquainted—with our empress.*

Perhaps she has a particular grudge against our present ruler?

Well, they look about the same age, so maybe something did happen between them…

“Never mind that law! Hurry up—accept my request and go buy me a battlecraft!” she yelled shrilly, apparently having reached the limit of her patience, before shooting at the ground by my feet again.

But no sooner had she done so than she was seized by several people carrying guns. They threw her to the ground.

“Police! You’re under arrest for extortion!”

The police had arrived. I guessed that they had approached the scene without sounding their sirens so she wouldn’t realize how close they were. There were four officers in all—two of whom detained my assailant while the other two questioned civilians around the crime scene.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Ako protested. “I was just teaching this lowly commoner to know where he stands in society!”

“Yeah, yeah. You can tell us all about it down at the station.”

The culprit wailed out a number of excuses at the officers, but they weren’t listening. After cuffing her, they shoved her right into their patrol car.

It was then that the police operator I’d kept on the line the whole time spoke up from my Wrist-Com.

“Hello, sir. It looks like our officers made it in time.”

“Ah, yes. Sorry about that, I forgot to hang up,” I said.

“No, no. Because of that, it was easy for us to assess the situation. Please leave the rest to the officers on the scene.”

“Thank you very much.”

After that exchange, I ended the call.

One of the officers then walked up to me. “You’re the victim?”

“Yes.”

“We heard what happened over the line, so we won’t need a further statement from you. We’ll prepare a form to register your claim, so we just need to see your ID.”

“Of course.”

I held out my Wrist-Com, sending my identification data to the tablet the officer was holding.

In the meantime, the culprit—Ako Shandelar—was glaring at me even as she was sandwiched between two police officers in the back of the patrol car. I pretended not to see her.

“All right, we’ll submit your claim for damages as a consequence of her threatening you,” the officer said.

“Thank you very much.”

Once my claim was done, the police officer stepped into the patrol car and sped off with the culprit in tow.

Since the Mercenaries Guild’s reputation had already been on the downswing because of some recent scandals, I couldn’t help but feel that the higher-ups would probably ask me to withdraw my claim to avoid any further damage…

Well, time to hurry home and read these new releases…

NPC No. 62: “What did you expect? The fact that you can’t even understand why is proof that you’re a steadfast idiot.”

That night, after the attack was over and done with, I enjoyed my new books and comics to my heart’s content.

When I thought about how that madwoman with the pink hair wouldn’t be bothering me again, it truly brought a smile to my face.

Later, I returned to the guild still feeling cheerful, but when I heard what Old Man Lohnes had to tell me, my mood immediately soured with displeasure.

“I’ve received a memo from the higher-ups at the Mercenaries Guild’s Ittsu Branch. They’re telling you to drop your claim against Ako Shandelar.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I asked.

“Well, it’s not like you actually ended up buying the ships for her. They’d like you to chalk it up as a misunderstanding.”

“Even though she pointed a gun at me and even fired a couple of warning shots?”

“She didn’t hit you, did she? All in a day’s work for a merc, right?” he asked. “Or so they say.”

“But that’s not the point…”

“Since they’ve already had plenty of scandals, they’d rather not leave any more bad impressions.”

“Well, maybe they should stop covering them up,” I said.

Unfortunately, what I’d predicted as I watched the pink-haired madwoman being carted off the previous day had come true. And even Lohnes, the one who was telling me about it, made no attempt to conceal his disapproval.

Honestly, I didn’t even understand what the point was. Surely it would be better for the guild to make a public statement about such misconduct whenever it was discovered, right? Their attempts to cover up or erase incidents could only make an even worse impression. Perhaps Ako Shandelar had a lackey in guild management?

While Lohnes and I were busy being appalled, Zaystall came

up to us.

"That's why I went and dealt with the matter," he said.

We were both dumbfounded. "Huh?"

"I made a report to the headquarters in the imperial capital, saying there was some possibility of corruption in our branch's management. They sent back instructions to fire all of them should they force you to drop your complaint against Ako Shandelar. So, you have nothing to worry about. And even if she escapes prosecution, she'll be forced to move to another branch," explained Zaystall.

Though he looked like any other woman here in reception, I couldn't help but feel like Zaystall had just displayed far more initiative than any of them.

Just who is Zaystall, anyway?

While I was caught up pondering that question, a sudden commotion erupted in the lobby.

Standing across the hall was, let's say, a *certain* mercenary of noble birth who used to be a member of this branch but was currently registered with the branch in the imperial capital. He'd brought his usual entourage with him, and all the female receptionists who used to try and butter him up immediately began doing so.

Why are they here again? Surely they can do whatever they like in the imperial capital.

After taking a look around the lobby, the noble spotted Zaystall. He walked up to him with a big grin on his face.

"Hey there. No one told me they had such cute girls working here."

Luckily, the man seemed so enthralled by Zaystall that he hadn't noticed me.

"How may I help you?" Zaystall asked.

"I'm looking for Federhelm. Can you call him for me?"

"Do you mean Mr. Lambert Reargraz? What shall I tell him?"

"Just tell him I'm the one asking for him."

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid we can't fulfill such a request without knowing who you are and where you've come from," said Zaystall resolutely, resisting the noble's commands.

This, of course, irritated the nobleman. "Are you really saying you don't know me?! I'm Straidam Bissen, Count Bissen's son. I'm a Queen-rank mercenary—and formerly known as the most talented member of the Ittsu branch! Don't be ridiculous!"

“I don’t believe you were still a member of this branch when I began working here, were you?” Zaystall asked. “I could hardly be expected to have heard of you. After all, you’re registered with the guild in the imperial city now.”

“Still, you *must* have heard stories about me!”

“No, not at all.”

Count Bissen’s son steadily grew more and more annoyed by the fact that Zaystall had never heard his name before. “Look, lady… Don’t get carried away just ’cause you’re pretty, okay?”

As this tense scene played out, we suddenly heard an easygoing voice in the background.

“Um… Whaddya mean someone wants to see me? Who is he?”

“I’m sure he’ll explain all that as soon as we see him.”

It sounded like one of Bissen’s sympathizers—one of the female receptionists—had taken it upon herself to fetch Mr. Cocky—aka Lambert Reargraz.

Though I had once called him Mr. Cocky, due to the varied experiences he had gone through during his work—or perhaps due to Rossweisse’s excellent coaching—he no longer gave off the slightest impression of that former cockiness. What I saw now was presumably his true self. His attitude had changed, and these days, he seemed quite earnest.

Well, I guess fainting every time you go into battle would have to squash your pride…

Once he recognized Lambert, Count Bissen’s son let out a declaration. “So you’re Federhelm? You should celebrate. I’m going to make you a member of the mercenary team I lead—Purgatorio. From now on, you’ll swear absolute loyalty to me and work yourself to the bone.”

In other words, he’d come to scout Lambert but was essentially offering him a slave contract. He probably planned to make Lambert do all the work while taking all the money and glory for himself.

Though Lambert’s power actually came from Rossweisse, Bissen probably foresaw that he would quickly become a worthy rival. He figured that before that could happen, he’d have Lambert join his ranks—as a slave, that is.

Lambert’s reply was just what I expected.

“Nah. I’m not planning on joining a team…”

First and foremost, he probably wanted to keep anything to do with Rossweisse as secret as possible.

Though, of course, there was no chance Count Bissen's son would take no for an answer.

"Huh? Are you saying you aren't pleased to have the chance to join my team and work for me?"

Why would he go along with someone who asked him to be a slave without even introducing himself first...?

Lambert stood there wearing an awkward expression, but then, I saw a familiar face appear behind him.

"What did you expect?" the newcomer said. "The fact that you can't even understand why is proof that you're a steadfast idiot."

"What? How dare you, you wench?!"

"My name isn't 'Wench.' I'm Rossweisse. I'm Federhelm's—Lambert Reargraz's—partner."

And she certainly was Rossweisse—a sentient, ancient superweapon. While I'd seen her face many times before, this was the first time she wasn't just on my screen.

So she finally got herself a bioroid body, did she?

I can't overstate how little I want to do with her...

There was no denying that she was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty. This must have made her irresistible prey in the eyes of Count Bissen's son.

Bissen's reaction was utterly predictable. "Oh...? Right then, well, starting today, you're my woman. Your *Federhelm* will be my subordinate, after all. Any woman of my subordinate's will become my woman."

After letting out a heavy sigh, Rossweisse looked at Count Bissen's son as if she felt genuinely sorry for him.

"I'm actually amazed that you turned out to be this stupid. Even though you have no real skill in combat, no mind for strategy, no eye for tactics, no leadership skills, no charisma, no class, no manners, and no common sense, you still manage to talk such a big game thanks to nothing more than your lineage and your thoroughly rotten sense of pride."

I felt like she'd really hit the nail on the head, but there was no chance that Count Bissen's son wouldn't be enraged by what she'd said.

"Why, you... Do you have any idea who you're talking to?!" he yelled.

"Garbage, right? Oh, well, that's kind of rude to garbage. At least garbage used to be something useful. Unlike you, who's been useless since the moment you were born."

Dang, Rossweisse, that's harsh. And this guy's totally the kind to flip out after hearing something like that.

Though…I do agree with you.

Count Bissen's son pointed a gun at Rossweisse. "It sounds like you want to die…"

Even though his weapon probably wouldn't work on Rossweisse, I knew I couldn't just let him shoot her. We were acquaintances, after all. I made up my mind to stop him and reached for my own pistol.

But at that moment, Zaystall stepped in front of Count Bissen's son with a peeved expression.

"Please put your gun away," he said.

"Oh, you're the receptionist from earlier. That's right, you were pretty mouthy with me despite being a mere commoner." Count Bissen's son then pointed his pistol at Zaystall. "If you get down on your knees and beg—in the nude—I might still forgive you."

Bissen's entourage reacted with a round of vulgar laughter. And when the receptionist who sympathized with Bissen saw this, she looked at Zaystall with a big grin on her face.

Seems like she has some kind of unfounded grudge against Zaystall. Maybe she can't stand the fact that another receptionist is prettier and more popular than her.

While I was pondering this, the confrontation between Zaystall and Count Bissen's son grew steadily more heated.

Zaystall spoke up next. "I did ask you to put that gun away, but it looks like you have no intention of listening to me."

"Didn't you hear me say that I might still forgive you if you begged me? Nude."

"It's a crime to draw a pistol in civilian spaces unless it's in self-defense. Even inside a branch of the Guild."

"That only applies to commoners. Nobles are allowed to."

"Didn't you know that privilege was done away with during the reign of the previous emperor?"

"Okay, then this is for self-defense. I feel like I'm about to be attacked," Bissen countered.

"Even though you're the one who drew your gun first?"

"Did I? But *I'm* the one who's about to be attacked. Though there's no way you'd have the guts to take a shot at me."

I guess you could call this tit for tat?

Their exchange seemed to be going nowhere up until that point. But when Count Bissen's son asserted that Zaystall

wouldn’t dare attack him, the receptionist finally reached the end of his patience.

Something inside Zaystall snapped. “Is that right? Very well. Here I come, then.” His expression had changed—he now looked as if he were looking at a pile of garbage.

In the very next moment, there was a dull thud as Zaystall’s fist connected with Bissen’s jaw.



Then, while Bissen was reeling from the blow, Zaystall followed that up by delivering a high kick to his neck.

Finally, Zaystall executed one more kick—with his foot raised above his own head. It hit Bissen in the chin. Strangely, it didn't cause Bissen to keel over backward. He started to fall face-first toward the floor, first dropping to his knees, and then collapsing on the floor face down.

I feel like I should remind you that since Zaystall was actually a *male* employee, he was wearing pants for this.

Zaystall turned to look at the now leaderless entourage. "Members of Purgatorio, or whatever you're called, I have defeated your leader. Aren't you going to come and avenge him?" he snapped.

Of course, there was no way guys of their caliber would follow Bissen's example. They wouldn't have stood a chance against Zaystall. In fact, they'd probably even lose to Arthur's girlfriend, Seira, on a bad day.

"Right. You're all under arrest for intimidation, then."

The next thing we knew, several security guards and droids arrived. They proceeded to take Count Bissen's son and his entourage away.

That was the end of that incident. But, despite being rotten, Count Bissen's son was still a noble, and I was sure that the higher-ups in the Ittsu branch of the Mercenaries Guild would have something to say about it.

To be honest, I was worried about what they might do.

But there was one thing I could say for certain.

Damn. Zaystall is awesome!

NPC No. 63: “My name’s Dan Biltropp. Knight rank. People call me the Invincible Tough Guy!”

The members of Purgatorio, the team of mercenaries led by Count Bissen’s son, had all succeeded in getting themselves arrested.

Even so, I’d been running into one crazy person after another since yesterday. I couldn’t believe my bad luck.

Now that that was done, Zaystall and Rossweisse greeted one another. And seeing that, the receptionist who had taken it upon herself to fetch Lambert glared bitterly at them.

Hang on, wasn’t she the receptionist I spoke to when I first came to the Mercenaries Guild? Though I doubt she has any memory of speaking to me, not even in the deepest recesses of her mind.

“I’m kinda worried about the higher-ups, that idiot Bissen, and what’s going on with Zaystall, but there’s no sense in us worrying about it. Let’s talk about getting you some work instead,” said Lohnes.

“Sure.”

After we’d watched that textbook comeuppance play out in front of our eyes, Old Man Lohnes tried to get our conversation back on track. He was clearly dumbfounded himself, but, unsurprisingly, he regained his bearings faster than I could.

“Out of all the job postings we have right now, the most peaceful assignment, relatively speaking, looks to be security for a high-society party on a colony.”

These were the details of the job description he handed me:

Task description: Contractor will maintain security around the colony serving as the venue for a party hosted by Marquess Nobandol. Will also manage the transport of guests as they arrive at the venue.

Task duration: 72 standard galactic hours (3 days).

As there will be a briefing session before work commences, all contractors are required to assemble 1 hour before the scheduled start time.

Subsequently, contractors will be divided into two groups who will take 12-hour continuous shifts followed by 12 hours on standby.

Breaks taken during work periods will be at the contractor's own discretion. Whenever leaving the worksite, contractors must report their absence.

Work environment: Contractor will be entitled to free use of the accommodations (capsule-style hotel) and free meals in the accompanying residential colony.

Fuel will be provided for contractor spaceships.

Work conditions: Contractor must bring own spaceship.

Repair costs for contractor spaceships are the responsibility of the contractor.

In the event of an emergency, contractor is required to sortie and deal with the problem, even when on standby.

For the above reason, leaving the colony while on standby is not permitted.

Except during an emergency, entering the party venue colony is strictly forbidden.

Compensation: 360,000 credits (fixed).

These were pretty favorable conditions, but there was one point that bothered me.

"There's nothing too odd about the job itself, but wouldn't the marquess's own security forces usually be all over an event like this?" I asked.

"The marquess's own forces will have their hands full with security inside the colony, so apparently, they just need mercenaries to take care of things outside. That includes managing the guests' arrivals."

"Well, it's not like we can deal with the aristocracy face-to-face," I said. "I'm just grateful they want to keep us outside."

At any high-society party, a lot of nobles were bound to show up. To provide security for them, the more guards we had, the better. And as for security inside the colony, it was probably more appropriate to leave that to people used to dealing with nobles.

“So you’ll take it, then. Make sure you get there on time,” said Lohnes.

“Roger that.”

Once I accepted the job, I hastily made my way out of the guild.

After that, I paid Gonzales for some information and bought some light novels and manga to pass the time between my upcoming shifts. Following some last-minute preparations, I departed from Planet Ittsu, giving myself plenty of time.

The colony that was to serve as the venue for the party orbited the planet of Ratakasa, which was within Marquess Nobandol’s territory.

For the most part, Planet Ratakasa was covered in boulders and ice. Since it received light from its sun—though just barely—it had day and night, plant life, and an atmosphere whose composition made it breathable for humans.

However, the air temperature, even when the surface was illuminated by its sun, never went above minus 120 degrees Celsius. Attempting to breathe it would rupture one’s lungs immediately, resulting in an instant death.

The trees that loomed in the midst of this deep freeze were called Soibis. They were perpetually lush with green needles. Soibis trees grew in rows that extended for hundreds of kilometers. Their trunks were said to be harder than diamonds.

It was for this reason that Planet Ratakasa—with its trails of green running over white fields—was considered to be a particularly beautiful planet.

Although humans might’ve been just about able to live on its surface with a great deal of development, Marquess Nobandol had not carried out any such project. Instead, there was just one holiday home and observation center built specially for Nobandol’s family on the planet. No one outside his circle was even allowed to visit the planet’s surface. He was most likely maintaining it as an evacuation shelter in case something went wrong for him.

Anyway, we mercenaries docked our ships at the accommodation colony that had been provided for us and made our way straight to the briefing hall.

The hall was crammed with mercs from a bunch of different branches, about two hundred in all. I sat down in one of the chairs provided on the far side of the hall.

That very instant, someone suddenly slapped me on the back with all their might.

“Hey! So you’re here too!”

“Oof!”

After turning to look in the direction the voice had come from, I saw a familiar face seated next to me.

“Ah, it’s you…” I said.

“What’s wrong? You don’t look too happy.”

“That’s ’cause you slapped me on the back…”

The culprit was Molieze, a rather boorish female mercenary. And as usual, she seemed to have forgotten any concept of delicacy.

“So you took this one too, huh, champ?” she asked. “I get it—security jobs like this are a good chance to kick back.”

As I was rubbing my shoulders and lower back, I saw Bernard—an old-timer—sit down in front of me.

“Hi, everybody. Long time no see!” he said.

“We do seem to keep ending up together.”

“Only first-rate mercenaries can handle a job like this. What’d you expect?”

I then saw that Arthur, Seira, and even Lebin were in the hall with us too. As always, Lebin’s outfit was pretty edgelordy, but he clearly still had plenty of self-respect.

Though we’d all unintentionally ended up together again after teaming up on a mission a while back, we were soon joined by someone else who hadn’t been with us then.

“Hey, bozos. Why the long faces?”

He was a man who was a little older than me. He was 185 centimeters tall, had a wiry physique, and wore his hair slicked back. The man also wore a perpetual grin.

When Molieze saw him, she grimaced. “I’d rather have a long face than have a stupid grin like you.”

“Heh. You always did have the last word.”

Though they both sounded irritated as they spoke, they each still had a hint of a smile in their expressions. I could tell their

bickering wasn't serious.

"Who the hell are you?" snapped Lebin, clearly wary of the man.

"Oh, right. I haven't met these three rookies before, or this old-timer." To answer Lebin's question, the man first placed one hand on his hip and pointed at himself with his thumb, striking a pose that reminded me of something I'd seen an anime hero do before. "My name's Dan Biltropp. Knight rank. People call me the Invincible Tough Guy!" he said, rattling off a humiliating line without a hint of embarrassment.

Though Dan's attitude and the things he said were pretty annoying, that didn't change the fact that he was a capable and trustworthy mercenary. On top of that, he was famous for having once made it to Bishop rank and then requesting his own demotion after finding all the nobles he had to deal with too annoying. Even if people didn't know his name, the story of the man who reached Bishop rank but asked to be demoted had spread far and wide.

Still, given the way he always acted, I wouldn't be surprised if everyone around him found him annoying as well. Even I hadn't felt like approaching him the first time I saw him because of his appearance and his general vibe.

But since then, I'd seen him rescue several of his allies during a large-scale battle and take the lead by rushing ahead into enemy lines to turn the tide of battle. On other occasions, I'd witnessed him save someone being harassed by nobles and offer encouragement to a person who was feeling down after a failed mission. Once I'd learned that he was not only courageous but thoughtful too, my opinion of him had changed.

"Hello, Dan, long time no see."

"Hey, John! Nerdy as ever, I see!"

Incidentally, the catalyst for our friendship had been when I had helped him find an old manga he'd been searching for.

By the way, Lebin and the others stared at us in disbelief throughout this whole encounter.

Well, I guess anyone would feel that way, meeting him for the first time.

We then had a brief conversation about nothing important.

An announcement then came over the loudspeakers. "We're about to commence the briefing for this mission. Please be seated."

Right. Time to get to work.

NPC No. 64: “I’m sure guys like that just want to be heroes as soon as possible.”

“My name is Doetas Twill, and I’m the head of security for the House of Nobandol. On this occasion, I am delighted to have your assistance in providing security for this party hosted by my master, Marquess Shivirus Nobandol. Though you’ve been contracted for a period of three days, tomorrow will be the only day dedicated to the party proper. Today will be a day of assembly, and the day after the party is set aside for the guests to disperse. The duties I’d like to entrust to you mercenaries today are securing the perimeter of the colony and directing my master’s guests to the entrance as they arrive. I must stress that the colony serving as the party venue is off-limits except during an emergency. I want you to understand that this rule is in place to ensure your own safety and indemnity. Nobles tend to be difficult to please. I’ll send you all the shift timetable shortly, but as for anyone whose name I’m about to call, I’d like you to gather here. Right then, once you’ve all confirmed the schedule, head to your assigned posts.”

I ended up being assigned to one corner of the main trunk of the colony. Shifts were to be shared by a pair of mercenaries at each location, allowing one to cover the other for meal and bathroom breaks.

I was glad that I didn’t have to sit the first shift out, but Bernard—whose ship was right next to mine—immediately started complaining about wanting a break.

Though, in all honesty, we had nothing to do.

The nobles all headed to the entrance in an orderly fashion, and since our post was some distance away from the entrance, none of them stopped to quarrel with us.

As for the people whose names had been called at the briefing, they had all been chosen to be in charge of directing traffic as the nobles arrived. They were to guide nobles to the entrance. The selection criteria for that job were that you had to be a hunk, a bombshell, or a pretty girl, and you had to be

capable of dealing calmly with nobles.

Out of my acquaintances, those who had been called were Arthur, Seira, and—if you can believe it—Rossweisse and Lambert.

When did they *sign up for this job?*

Anyway, I was glad that at least Rossweisse hadn't started a conversation with me.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Bernard struck up a conversation with me, sounding like he wanted to kill some time.

"Anyway, champ, why'd you sign up for this job?" he asked. "I know it was the only easy job going, but I would've thought you'd hate going on missions that have hardly anything to do with combat—and plenty to do with nobles to boot."

As one might have expected from a former police officer, Bernard was asking some pretty sharp questions.

I was busy reading a light novel so I wasn't free to chat, and he was bringing up a subject I would've really preferred to have left alone. But since communication is important in the workplace, I answered him.

"I've been feeling a little worn out," I said. "I left the choice up to Old Man Lohnes."

That's right—usually, I would take a look at the jobs posted on the bulletin board and search for one myself before taking it on. But after I had gotten attacked near the duke's territory and that situation with Pinky, I found that no matter how much anime I watched or manga I read, I couldn't really enjoy myself.

Considering the condition I was in, it would have been dangerous to take on a job that was certain to involve combat. That had been why I'd left it to Lohnes to pick a job where combat seemed unlikely.

"Huh, I see. So you wanted to avoid the risk of battle."

"The more competent and courageous mercs will still call me a chicken and a coward," I said.

"I'm sure guys like that just want to be heroes as soon as possible." Bernard, the old coot that he was, chuckled to himself and pulled something that looked like a smokeless pipe away from his lips. "Still, things sure are quiet here. D'you mind if I take a nap? I'm gettin' old, you see. I'm kinda struggling."

"If you don't mind me turning my volume way up, you can have like two hours."

“That’s fine. Thanks, kid.”

Since I was sure he knew what I meant about turning my volume up, he must *really* have been struggling if he still wanted to sleep.

Two hours passed.

Knowing that I had to wake Bernard up pretty soon, I started turning my volume way up.

However, Bernard had evidently already woken up and called me. “Hrm… I hardly feel like I’ve slept at all.”

“Ah, you’re awake?”

And I was just about to transmit at full volume too. Pity.

“Hey, why are you looking so disappointed?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“But you know, even if I recline my pilot’s seat, I find I don’t sleep too well,” Bernard said.

“Leaves you feeling a bit stiff, doesn’t it?”

Old Bernard stretched his body and loosened his joints as he lamented not having been able to sleep comfortably.

“You can take a break next, champ.”

The fact that he was offering to let me rest after having had a chance to do so himself showed that Bernard was a decent and thoughtful guy. I’d taken plenty of security jobs like this before where my shiftmates had taken breaks without giving me the same opportunity.

I decided to take Bernard up on his kind offer. “Ah, then I’ll go to bed for a while,” I said.

“Hold on. What do you mean, ‘bed’?” asked Bernard, seizing upon that single word.

“On my ship, I have a bed, a toilet, a shower, a microwave, and a fridge. They’re all makeshift, miniature ones, but they do the job. Didn’t I mention that?”

We had both been part of the mission to eliminate the terrorists in Count Icolai’s territory, and I hadn’t made use of the tents they had provided us. I’d thought he had probably guessed where I had slept that night.

“What?” he said. “Hey, kid! Pop back to the colony and lend me that ship!”

“No way!”

Clearly Bernard had decided that he was no longer satisfied with his two-hour nap and wanted to pester me now, but I

decided to ignore him and took my nap anyway.

When we reached the end of our first twelve-hour shift, we changed places with the next crew and headed to the colony that had been provided for our accommodations.

At first, Bernard had persisted in his demands that I lend my ship to him, but he eventually gave up and instead asked where I had gotten it. I could only tell him that I had gotten help from a mechanic I knew and had put it together myself.

“Maybe I should make one too. Nah… I still have a loan on this ship…” he muttered.

Anyway, I arrived at the colony’s cafeteria with thoughts of having a meal, taking a bath, and going straight to bed on my mind, but the last person I wanted to see walked up to me.

“Long time no see, Captain Ouzos.”

“Ah, hello…”

My worst fear had come true—I was now face-to-face with Rossweisse’s bioroid body.

This blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman—who was gorgeous enough that I could tell she was beautiful just by seeing her on my monitor—was spelling disaster for me just by talking to me.

“I believe this is our first time meeting since my change,” she said.

We actually have *crossed paths again since then, but I don’t need to mention that.*

“Thank you for your work keeping the lines organized…” I said.

“It was dreadful. Every time the idiot son of some nobleman passed by, he tried to pick me up, every time! They were all so perverted, it was unbearable!”

As we conducted this trivial conversation, I realized I had to let everyone around us know that she already had a partner.

“Did Lambert, your partner, do anything to assist you?” I asked.

“Well, each time, he said, ‘Excuse me, but we do need to guide other guests,’ to protect me…” Rossweisse said, and then she started to fidget. It gave me the impression that things hadn’t been so dreadful after all.

I didn’t know what had gone on between the two of them, but I had the feeling that they were becoming much closer. In any case, I figured that Rossweisse’s words had made everyone

around us understand that she already had a partner.

But at that very moment…

"Hey, who's this? Your girlfriend?"

Molieze had come along and blurted out something that undid all my hard work. But I knew that if I allowed myself to become flustered, it would only make things worse.

Just stay calm and tell her the truth.

"This is Rossweisse. She's *Federhelm's* partner."

"Oh… *The* Federhelm, huh?" After looking at Rossweisse with keen interest, Molieze turned to look at me again. "Just how do you know Federhelm's partner?"

"I just happened to be on the battlefield when Federhelm flew his first mission. His name's Lambert Reargraz."

Molieze's question had been a blatant attempt to stir up gossip, but I had answered with nothing but the truth.

"And during that mission…he was kind enough to talk to me about Lambert…" Rossweisse added, backing up my story.

That's true, we did talk about Lambert… You've really changed your tune since then, huh?

She's in that so-called lovey-dovey phase now. In other words, she's doing exactly what a tsundere would do.

"Huh. I see…" said Molieze, looking at Rossweisse with a big grin on her face.

She's definitely thinking about making fun of me.

But before she could do that, a savior arrived.

"Old-timers like you shouldn't be making fun of youngsters."

My salvation came in the form of Bernard, who was holding a can of nonalcoholic beer in one hand and a skewered squid tentacle that'd been dipped in soy sauce in the other. He immediately chided Molieze.

Molieze may be older than me, but she's no old-timer…

Of course, *that* was the point she jumped on.

"I'm still only in my twenties, y'know?" she shot back.

"As far as this young lady's concerned, you're well past your prime."

"Look who's talking, you old fart…"

"Now, now. Calm down, both of you…"

"You're bothering everyone else here."

Just when Molieze grabbed Bernard by the collar, Arthur and Seira suddenly came into the cafeteria and stepped in between the two of them. Thanks to their intervention, both seemed to

calm down a little.

Still, since Rossweisse is here, I can't help but wonder where Lambert went. Is he surrounded by starstruck mercenaries somewhere?

"By the way, where's Lambert?" I asked.

"Over there," replied Rossweisse, pointing to a table on the far side of the cafeteria.

There, I could see that Lambert and Lebin were face-to-face, engaged in a passionate discussion about something.

"They've apparently been talking about what some shopping district or other has to offer. Of all things..."

Ah, I see.

He may have lost his cocky attitude, but from everything I've heard about him from Rossweisse and what I've observed of his behavior myself, I bet he would like that place.

Well, I guess it's good that he's made a friend.

NPC No. 65: “Still, please try not to leave until the culprit is apprehended. If you aren’t careful, we might suspect you of being accomplices.”

Luckily, the break after my first twelve-hour shift ended without incident, aside from the conversation I had gotten caught up in after Rossweisse had approached me.

My shift the next day turned out to be just as dull as the previous one.

Every guest who had received an invitation to the event was in attendance. And as everything required for the party had been delivered the previous day, there were no delivery people coming or going either.

I was sure the venue itself would be bustling, but those of us providing security on the colony’s perimeter were severely underutilized.

Of course, since we couldn’t know what might happen, we still needed to be vigilant.

However, a small change *had* occurred. The mercenaries who had taken charge of organizing the lines of guests entering the venue had been reassigned to provide security inside. The organizers’ reason for including them in the venue’s security detail was probably to try and corner them.

Well, given their good looks and their track records, I can see why nobles might want to try to snatch them up. In particular, I bet they’re all itching to get the two pilots behind Federhelm on their staff. Arthur and Seira are a promising pair as well, so I’m sure they’re having a hard time too…

This was probably the nobles’ aim from the very start.

All I can do is pray that my acquaintances come home safe.

The hours ticked by once again, and my second shift came to an end. When I returned to the accommodation colony, I found that the people who’d been deployed to provide security inside the party venue had already returned. Some were delighted, others seemed disappointed, and others still seemed infuriated.

There were all sorts of reactions, but the two women I knew were absolutely enraged.

“Honestly, it’s not even funny! Asking me to be their personal bodyguard is one thing, but to become someone’s mistress? There’s something wrong with their heads!”

Seira’s rage was so infernal that I thought she might sprout horns. I watched as she crushed a can of juice in one hand.

“Why are noblemen all so gross? Would it be so wrong to blast that colony to space dust with them inside…?” Rossweisse muttered.

Rossweisse, you can’t say things like that, not even under your breath!

I knew she could actually pull something like that off too, so I really wanted her to stop making threats.

In contrast, their respective…partners, I guess—meaning Arthur and Lambert—simply looked exhausted. The two men had probably spent the whole party hemmed in by crowds of noblewomen themselves.

Well, that’s just what fate has in store for protagonists.

I spent a while longer listening to their complaints.

After having dinner and taking a bath, I figured there was nothing left to do but get some sleep. I was settling in for the evening when an emergency alarm started blaring.

A typical emergency announcement was then broadcast over loudspeakers.

“Alert! Alert! An unidentified convoy is currently approaching the colony. As they have refused our request for them to provide their hull codes, we have determined them to be pirates or marauders of some kind. All combatants are to scramble immediately. Noncombatants, please evacuate to a safe area and prepare to flee the colony. I repeat…”

I immediately changed back into my piloting gear and headed to my ship. Then, following the control tower’s instructions, I went to intercept the enemy.

Though the fleet sent to attack us was made up entirely of drones and light craft, they were abnormally numerous. I roughly estimated their numbers as being between seven hundred and eight hundred ships.

However, to put it bluntly, though both the colony serving as the party venue and the one serving as accommodation for us

were valuable, there was nothing else of value inside them. If one were to disassemble the colonies and sell them for parts, that would take a lot of time. And if someone tried to sell them as they were, they'd be easy to track and very costly to fence.

Therefore, our opponents must have been planning to take the nobles attending the party hostage and demand ransoms for them. And in that case, there was no way we could afford to let them through.

The control tower seemed to understand that much and gave us precise commands. "This is Control! Don't let even a single ship get through to the colony! Guards inside the colony, secure the entrances!"

We mercs took that as our signal to sortie and intercept the enemy. However, we immediately felt like something wasn't quite right.

"What's with these guys?" asked Molieze. "They aren't putting up any kind of fight!"

"At this rate, I won't get to show off my skills!" Lebin whined.

The enemy really wasn't putting up much of a fight. Sure, the ships were attacking, and they'd pursue us if we evaded them, but their maneuvers were totally lifeless. It was fair to say that the unmanned drones were as you'd expect, but the manned ships were just as lacking in spirit.

That was why Molieze and Lebin—two people who'd been excited at the opportunity to get a workout at first—were starting to complain.

Could it be that the party's organizers set this up as a spectator event?

Not that we'd put up with something like that...

"What's the matter? This is a cakewalk," said Bernard. "And besides, look up ahead. Those two are really getting into it. Just leave it to them."

Just as he had said, Seira and Rossweisse were tearing up the battlefield right before our eyes.

"Like I keep telling you, Arthur and I are devoted to each other! Yeah, I'm talking to you, all you hussies who keep hanging around him!" screamed Seira.

"Don't you *dare* come near me, you vile creatures!" cried Rossweisse.

With expressions of lingering rage on their faces, the two ladies proceeded to blow the drones and light craft apart with

startling zeal. Their fervor was such that they ran the real possibility of annihilating all of them.

Guess I better not get too close. I might get caught in the cross fire.

The other mercenaries seemed to understand that risk and kept a good bit of distance between themselves and Seira and Rossweisse too.

Lebin watched Rossweisse fervently blast away drone after drone. "Y'know... Lambert really is awesome. Though when we were having our heart-to-heart, he didn't give off the same impression at all..." he muttered.

Well, yeah, he wouldn't.

After all, Rossweisse is the one running amok right now.

But everyone around us took it for granted that Lambert was the one piloting. They assumed that Rossweisse, despite her support role, was just making a lot of noise.

Through the efforts of those two fearsome maidens, our assailants were all silenced after just forty-six minutes of combat.

The aftermath spawned a new mission—clearing up all the debris that remained from the enemy's ships. Only those of us who had been on standby when the attack had occurred were expected to deal with that.

I sure wish I'd gone to sleep sooner...

When we finished clearing up the debris, there were less than two hours remaining until the next shift started. I took a ninety-minute nap and then headed back. But even though we were supposed to be relieved by the mercs on the next shift at the worksite, I found them all waiting in the hangar.

What's going on? I wondered.

"Attention, all workers and mercenaries. We ask that you return to your rooms where you are currently lodging and remain there until you are given permission to leave. If you disobey these instructions, you will run the risk of being arrested on suspicion of committing homicide. There will be a detailed explanation of the situation later. We ask you for your cooperation in the meantime. I repeat. Attention, all workers..."

This was a highly irregular notification.

I guessed that something must have happened on the colony serving as the party venue. And judging by what had been said

in the announcement, I could only bet there was a great detective on the case inside the venue.

Given that I didn't know how long we'd be detained, I decided to use this time to take another nap.

Four hours had elapsed.

"We apologize for keeping you waiting. All workers and mercenaries currently present at the accommodation colony, please assemble in the central hall. I repeat. All workers…"

Following these instructions, I headed to the hall that had been used for our initial briefing. I found that the head of the marquess's security forces and someone who looked like a detective were already there.

"Err, hello. I am Wiboid Royman of the criminal investigation department in the capital of Planet Tamuo, the closest police department to here. Though at first I was contacted to investigate the fleet of ships that attacked the venue for this event, this has suddenly become a murder investigation…"

The police detective speaking to us was a young man wearing a threadbare suit and a slightly weary expression.

"Err, the victim is Count Beidaz Chiralgis Gaizam, one of the guests at the party. The cause of death was stabbing, and we discovered several stab wounds on his chest. The crime scene was the room where the count was lodging. The identity of the culprit is under intense investigation. Right now, on the other colony, I expect the grandson of a baron who was a famous intellectual is putting on quite the show as an amateur detective."

I knew it! I knew we'd get one of those grim reapers who calls himself a detective.

Now, by calling amateur investigators grim reapers, I didn't mean that he'd be carrying out murders himself. Rather, I meant that a murder was bound to occur wherever he found himself—an ironclad rule of mystery stories. This had led to such investigators being scorned almost as personifications of death, and many people would make the same association.

Putting that to one side, the fact that the count had been stabbed many times meant that he must have earned himself quite the grudge from somebody.

"Ah, one other thing," Royman added. "Everyone currently aboard this accommodation colony is in the clear. According to

the testimony of witnesses on the other colony, the count was still alive during the attack by those marauders.”

With a beleaguered expression, Detective Royman had declared us all to be unrelated to the case.

However, in the very next moment, he dropped a bombshell that made us all very nervous.

“Still, please try not to leave until the culprit is apprehended. If you aren’t careful, we might suspect you of being accomplices.”

And when Detective Royman said that, he had a genuinely sharp look in his eye.

NPC No. 66: “That’s right. *That* Edward Rockmeichy was my grandfather! Though, unlike my grandfather, I’m not very skilled.”

☆☆☆

Aside: Fialka Tielsad

I was currently attending Marquess Shivirus Nobandol’s high society party—not as a mercenary, but as the daughter of Viscount Tielsad.

As for why, it was because an invitation had been sent to my father, Olbart Tielsad. He was not only a viscount but also the president of Tielsad Corporation, a spaceship manufacturer.

Since he had to manage his company either way, father was not firmly aligned with either the pro-imperial or anti-imperial factions. You might say that his policy was to wait and see what happened while he maintained his position on the fence.

It so happened that Marquess Shivirus Nobandol was also a fence-sitter as well as one of father’s former university professors whom he respected very deeply. The marquess himself had told father, “Show your face once in a while.” And with that, father had no choice but to attend.

The invitation stated that he was to bring his family. So that included my father Olbart, my mother Alishia, and their daughter—meaning me, Fialka. If my maid Shelley were to come too, she would be able to help me protect my parents, which I found so reassuring. So with the addition of Shelley, four of us went to the party.

By the way, Shelley was not wearing her usual maid uniform here. Instead, she donned a long-sleeved dress that covered her whole body.

Mother and I had been very excited when we had been deciding on an outfit for Shelley. Though Shelley herself had started crying, which had earned us a lecture from father. But for the four hours leading up to that moment, Shelley had been very much like a doll for girls playing dress-up.

Though, since she’d given me the same treatment when I was

a child, I suppose this made us even.

The party venue was a colony owned by Marquess Nobandol, and we arrived the day before the party. That day was what one might call an assembly day. The party itself was supposed to start the following evening.

Marquess Nobandol came to greet us as soon as we arrived. He had a luxurious head of hair in a distinguished uniform gray, narrow spectacles, and a very long, white beard. He seemed really nice.

The marquess's wife also looked quite elegant, and I felt like they must have had a loving marriage.

From the time we arrived until the start of the party, our stay was peaceful and uneventful.

Now, I found myself aboard a small colony paused in its orbit around Planet Ratakasa, which was within Marquess Nobandol's territory. A great hall was serving as the venue for this cocktail party.

Outside the windows of the venue, we had a view of the beautiful surface of Planet Ratakasa, with its vast white fields crisscrossed with trails of green.

Many of the guests at the party were the marquess's former pupils, and a number of them were father's old friends from school. My father really seemed to be enjoying himself. Also at the party were representatives of every field of endeavor, which spoke to just how well-connected the marquess was. Additionally, there were people from both the pro- and anti-imperial factions in attendance.

But on top of all that, I was shocked to find that there were several members of the Mercenaries Guild's Ittsu branch among the security staff. Of course, this only included such individuals as the very fetching pair that made up Federhelm and that fellow who piloted a white vessel and his girlfriend. Mr. Lingard and Miss Cynida, I think?

Anyway, I was a short distance away from father and mother and was enjoying the food on offer with Shelley.

"Ah, this is yummy," I said.

"Let's ask them to tell us the recipe," replied Shelley.



In the middle of our conversation, we were approached by another guest.

“Oh? Young lady, I don’t believe we’ve met. What’s your name?”

A middle-aged man of medium build and height had come to speak to us. He had slicked-back hair, a handlebar mustache, and a monocle. He also had some men who looked like his entourage in tow. His attitude made me think that he was probably quite a high-ranking nobleman.

“My name is Fialka Tielsad, the daughter of Viscount Olbart Tielsad. And this is Shelley, my bodyguard,” I said, introducing myself politely and respectfully.

“Oh…? Ah, you’re the daughter of the president of Tielsad Corporation? I’m sure you already know this, but I’m Count Beidaz Chiralgis Gaizam.”

The count and the members of his entourage all grinned, looking at Shelley and me with lecherous gazes.

“Tell your father this: ‘If you align your goals with mine, it’ll be to your benefit.’”

With that, he turned and walked away with his entourage.

Though he had spoken about my father’s benefit, it was clear that he wanted nothing more than to turn father into a golden goose.

He had a pervy look in his eyes when he looked at me too. Unbelievable.

With that unpleasant encounter still on my mind, the party neared its end and the guests started to head their separate ways. Some went back to their rooms while others—feeling they hadn’t had enough to drink—went to a bar on the colony, while others still went to avail themselves of the spa facilities.

But just as the guests were filing out, an emergency alarm suddenly sounded throughout the hall. It was alerting us to the fact that a battle had started outside the colony.

Naturally, the mercenaries all answered the call to arms, and the marquess’s own soldiers also joined the fight.

But perhaps because of the alcohol in their bloodstream, the nobles around me didn’t show the slightest hint of concern about the danger involved. Instead, some began making carefree comments.

“Wow, they’re really going at it!”

“Fancy a bet on how many enemy vessels each ship on our side can take down?”

“Now you’re talking!”

While I would have liked to join the battle myself, since I naturally hadn’t come to the party in my mother ship, which housed the battlecraft I used on missions as a mercenary—the Uklimo and the Egalim, respectively—there was nothing I could do.

Shelley and I ran over to join my father and mother instead. Fortunately, they were both safe. I asked them to get ready so we could escape at a moment’s notice.

However, my worries were betrayed by the result of the battle—it ended in a one-sided victory for the mercenaries. And since our enemy would hardly send another attack after that, I was able to sleep peacefully that night.

However, the very next morning, we found out that an unthinkable incident had occurred. One of the guests—Count Beidaz Chiralgis Gaizam—had died after being stabbed several times in the chest with a bladed weapon.

Naturally, the police were called, and from that point on, no one was allowed to leave the colony. We were not even permitted to leave our rooms as a team of detectives wanted to call on each guest, in turn, to be questioned.

After that had gone on for some time and they had seen everyone else, it was finally my turn.

The interview took place in one of the several meeting rooms on the colony.

After first taking my fingerprints, the detective in charge of the investigation spoke to me without even introducing himself.

“Now then. Am I right in thinking that you’re Miss Fialka, the daughter of Viscount Tielsad?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re also a Bishop-ranked mercenary…”

“Yes, sir.”

For some reason, the detective in charge of questioning the guests had a sleepy look in his eyes, and his manner of speaking also lacked enthusiasm.

However…

“Being a mercenary makes you something of an expert in doing harm to others,” he began. “Even though you’re a woman, it’d be easy for you to carry out a murder. On top of that, since

you likely know some of the mercenaries just outside the colony, it also would have been easy for you to escape if you wanted to."

His eyes suddenly sharpened as he started to mount circumstantial evidence against me.

"So you're saying I'm the killer?" I asked.

"Were you previously acquainted with the victim?"

"I met him for the first time yesterday."

The detective rubbed his chin as he fixed his gaze on me. "However, considering your career as a mercenary, it's entirely possible that someone asked you to kill him."

His tone of voice made me think that he was actually mocking mercenaries.

"Mercenaries are not contract killers," I objected.

"How rude of me. In fact, neither you nor your parents nor your android show up on the surveillance camera footage covering the victim's room. More to the point, your fingerprints weren't found on the knife found at the scene, which is undoubtedly the murder weapon. Besides, the victim seems to have fostered plenty of grudges, so there are other people we might suspect apart from you," he explained. "Well, this brings the interview to an end. You are free to go home."

With that sudden declaration of my innocence, the detective had completely sidestepped my objection.

Something about this detective really makes me mad.

After I was released from my police interview, another officer spoke to me. "I'm terribly sorry, but could you please head to the great hall? Where the party was held."

I headed back to the venue, only to find the host of the party —Marquess Shivirus Nobandol—a number of other nobles, some of the marquess's servants, and temporary staff who worked at the party all gathered there. Father, mother, and Shelley were there too.

I wondered what on earth could be happening as I went to rejoin my family, and a young man in the center of the hall abruptly called out to the crowd gathered there.

"Ladies and gentlemen. I have identified the culprit in this murder case!" said a fairly handsome man dressed in a tuxedo. "Ah, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Mike Rockmeichy. I'm the successor to an unremarkable baron, as well as being an unremarkable journalist."

I stood there, dumbfounded by this sudden change in my situation.

"Rockmeichy... If memory serves, during the reign of one emperor three generations ago, there was a baron and university professor who helped the police solve many different cases, whose name was Edward Rockmeichy. By the way, this is the man who instructed the police to gather all of us here," Shelley quietly explained to me.

The older guests all seemed to recognize his name and reacted accordingly.

"Ah, *that* detective!"

"Is that really him?!"

"That's right," the man said. "*That* Edward Rockmeichy was my grandfather! Though, unlike my grandfather, I'm not very skilled."

Mike Rockmeichy, the scion of barons, made a theatrical gesture.

"So, Master Rockmeichy. Is it true that you know who the killer is?" asked a portly man I took to be a detective.

"Yes, detective. There can be no doubt," he responded. "Whoever the culprit of this homicide is, it must have been someone holding a deep grudge against Count Beidaz Chiralgis Gaizam—someone who suffered at his hands. In other words, *everyone* here besides me is a culprit!"

"What?! Is that true?"

"No doubt about it. Marquess Shivirus Nobandol himself hosted this party in order to make this murder happen!"

Master Rockmeichy then pointed at the party's host, Marquess Nobandol.

Apart from the portly detective and the other officers, everyone assembled there was stunned. Their expressions seemed to say, *What the heck is this guy talking about?*

The detective who had questioned me earlier entered the hall, accompanied by another officer. "Inspector," he said, "we've arrested one of the waiters hired for this party—he's the culprit." He and the other officer had someone else with them—a young man in a waiter's uniform in handcuffs.

"What?! What are you talking about?!" cried Master Rockmeichy.

"I'm sure I reported this to you. There was a waiter who tried to run away before we could question him. After detaining and

investigating him, we found his fingerprints on the knife that served as the murder weapon. We also found his fingerprints elsewhere in the victim's room. Not only that, but we found traces of blood on his uniform."

The detective I had seen only a short while earlier reported all of this to Rockmeichy in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I'm telling you! Everyone here in this hall acted in a way that made it easier for him to carry it out!" cried Rockmeichy, insisting that his deduction must have been correct. But no one was willing to listen to him any longer.

By the way, it turned out that the people who'd made comments earlier recognizing Rockmeichy had actually meant "So *that's* the grandson of the great Edward Rockmeichy—the famous screwup."

NPC No. 67: “I do beg your pardon. But I am, after all, a mercenary, so I can handle simple problems like this.”

Although Detective Royman had declared all of us to be free from suspicion, that only meant we were not being suspected of murder. There was still a chance of us being suspected of aiding and abetting the crime.

If any of us tried to take off in our ships, we’d definitely be arrested on the spot. Naturally, our security work was also suspended.

Though I was concerned about what might happen to my payment, that was a trifling concern compared to being charged with murder.

I didn’t know whether I should count on forensics or a great amateur detective, but I sure wanted one of them to find the killer quickly.

That being said, I really had nothing to do. So, sitting in something akin to a conference room, I drank a carbonated beverage while watching TV without much interest.

Then, an unfamiliar woman spoke to me.

“Mind if I sit next to you?”

I hesitated for a moment but said, “Go ahead.”

She was kind of a sexy babe and didn’t seem like a fellow mercenary. I still instantly became wary of her. The only women this pretty who would ever approach me were saleswomen and honey traps.

After a brief silence, she suddenly spoke to me again. “Say, would you mind lending me your ship?”

For a moment, I didn’t even understand what she was asking me, but after a few seconds, I somehow managed to respond. “No can do… Do you understand the situation we’re in right now?”

She turned to me with a coquettish expression. “C’mon. I just want to see the show that amateur detective is putting on aboard the other colony. He might be really good-looking, you know?”

Doesn't she understand how that'll play out? Going to see him means leaving this colony, which means she'll be suspected of being an accomplice to murder.

Wait, that's not it…

There's a high chance that she actually is *in cahoots with the murderer over there.*

They'd probably infiltrated this colony during the assault on the colony—or maybe even earlier and by some other means—before sneaking into the victim's room while everyone else was panicking about the attack.

But, for some reason, they'd lost the use of their own ship, so they decided they'd ask someone for help. This girl had picked me for that, thinking I'd lend her my ship at the drop of a hat as long as someone as pretty as she was asking.

"Anyway, I won't be lending you my ship. If you really need to go, why not try asking one of the police inspectors?" I suggested.

Once I'd firmly rejected her, the girl's expression turned sour.

"I give up. You're just a loser who won't even try to grant a lady's adorable demands! Ugh, creep!" she seethed loudly.

The people around us were split into three camps. There were those who were so far away they only heard her last line, saw me—an obvious dork—and chuckled. There were also those who had heard everything the woman had said and frowned, clearly thinking she was crazy. Then, there were those who just looked down at their cans of nonalcoholic beer as if to say this had nothing to do with them. Though…that third group was mostly made up of Bernard, Molieze, and Dan.

"That woman's crazy, right? Personally, I'm not part of the detective bandwagon, so I'm not even interested."

That was Molieze.

"She's pretty suspicious. Though I doubt she committed the actual murder."

Bernard.

"We mercs don't hand out ships like candy. That young lady really doesn't get mercs," said Dan.

The three of them continued their carefree discussion, pairing their alcohol-free beer with soy sauce-dipped squid tentacle skewers and peanuts.

Anyway, I'd better report this to the inspector. If I don't and this comes out later, it'll be a bit awkward for me.

After asking a member of the colony's staff where he was, I soon found Detective Royman.

"I see... That is suspicious. The fact that she tried to sweet-talk you probably means something went wrong with their original escape route..." said the detective. He had a can of coffee in one hand and was wrestling with a stack of holo-paper with the other.

"But if that's the case, why did she bother sweet-talking me in the first place? Why not stay quiet and just steal my ship?" I asked.

"If they lacked the means to disable a ship's security systems, sweet-talking you would be the better bet."

I really had wondered what the point of buttering me up was, but if they couldn't disable my ship's security, that made sense.

"Anyway, thank you for the information. We should know the killer's identity soon, so please just hold tight for a little longer," said Detective Royman, scratching his head before bowing apologetically.

Upon returning to my room, I remembered that I'd already finished reading the light novel I'd brought with me. If I had just gone to sleep on my ship, I would have avoided this calamity. On the other hand, I might be suspected of trying to run away if I were to hole up in my ship, so I put that thought out of my mind. Still, even just going to grab some books might attract some suspicion, so I spoke to one of the workers in the hangar before heading to it.

When I got to my ship, the woman from earlier was there, and she pointed a gun at me.

It really seems like I'm getting held up at gunpoint a lot lately.

"What do you want?" I asked. "I don't have much cash on me."

"Hand over your ship."

I'd raised my hands and mentioned money, but of course, that wasn't what she was after.

"Didn't I say that was out of the question?" I replied, thinking I'd at least try repeating what I'd just told her.

"Say. Don't you think the state of the world these days is unfair?" she asked.

This time, she had some kind of speech ready for me. She launched right into it.

"By the use of military force, the empire has united many different states and gathered more power for themselves. As a

result, their blatant system of class discrimination—dividing us into royalty, nobility, imperial citizens, and colonial citizens—has been established throughout the galaxy. The nobles and royals are especially awful, and I've had to get comfortable with doing a lot of things that turned my stomach. Haven't you had to deal with your share of humiliation too? When those bastards see a pretty girl or boy, they lose the ability to communicate with others in any way that doesn't use the lower half of their bodies. I've heard that the noble who was killed today was one of the most ardent critics of the current empress. We managed to bury one of those bastards! Don't you think that's a tremendous achievement in our fight for justice? You should help me help the hero who took him out! Let's bring the hammer of justice down on the royals, nobles, and imperial citizens who've caused us so much pain!"

She seemed to be pretty high on her own supply of rhetoric.

Guess she's with those demonstrators for independence we saw on the street.

"I understand that the nobles have done terrible things to you, and I've had plenty of horrible experiences myself," I said. "My dad, for example, had to pay for the embezzlement committed by some nobleman's spoiled brat and even had to shoulder his debt. Even so, I have no complaints about our current empress, so I simply can't lend you my ship."

I countered her entirely intoxicated rhetoric with my own honest opinion.

Her expression turned to one of disbelief. "Why not?! If we rid ourselves of the royals, nobles, and imperial citizens, we'll be able to live without suffering! Things will be better!"

"Even if we got rid of the royals, nobles, and imperial citizens, something similar would emerge to take their place."

For example, wealth disparity or a dichotomy between those who were sympathetic to the revolution and those who weren't.

Of course, that wasn't the answer she was hoping for.

"I see. Then I guess it can't be helped. Though, as far as I'm concerned, I never would have wanted a dork like you as a comrade." She looked at me with revulsion, and I saw her clench the hand that was holding her pistol.

"But I don't want to die. Here. Take the key to my ship!" I said, tossing my ship's ignition key to her.

Then, while she was distracted, I drew my own blaster, aimed

at the hand she was holding her gun with, and squeezed the trigger.

“Eek!”

When she let go of her gun, I took advantage of the opening to run up to her and retrieve my key. Then, I aimed my pistol at her leg and squeezed the trigger again.

“Argh!”

Since I’d set my blaster’s power on the low side, I hadn’t blown her hand or her leg off. Still, the shots had to hurt quite a lot. The woman, who didn’t look like a mercenary or a secret agent, collapsed to the floor and stopped moving.

After picking up her gun, I pointed the muzzle of my blaster at her again. “I do beg your pardon. But I am, after all, a mercenary, so I can handle simple problems like this.”

NPC No. 68: “That’s ’cause I overheard you asking him to lend you his ship the first time, young lady. Also, it’s not like being gorgeous and being charming always go hand in hand, ya know?”

After swiftly confirming that she was no longer able to move, I punched the number Detective Royman had given me into my Wrist-Com and called him.

I know what I just did might look awful to anyone watching from the sidelines, but she was the one who pointed a gun at me and threatened to shoot first. Hopefully he won’t be too hard on me.

“Yes, hello? This is Royman.”

The detective immediately answered the phone, so I pointed my Wrist-Com’s camera at the woman and reported my current situation.

“Sorry to bother you. I was just attacked in the colony’s hangar. I’ve made it so the perp can’t move around too easily, and I’m watching her now,” I explained.

“I see. Sounds like you ran into an impatient accomplice to the murderer. I’ll come right away to detain her, so please don’t let her get away.”

“Understood,” I said, ending the call and putting my Wrist-Com in camera mode.

Even as she contorted her face in agony, the woman still managed to keep glaring at me. However, she quickly put on a tearful expression.

“Help me! He’s going to kill me!” she screamed all of a sudden.

She got me. Someone must’ve entered the hangar, so she’s making a fuss to get their attention.

If it’s Detective Royman, I’ll be all right, but if it’s anyone else, it’s safe to say that I’m at a disadvantage under these circumstances.

Depending on how things shake out, she might even get away.

The woman knew all this, and I saw her grin broadly.

“Please, help me! Quick!” she cried again.

Whoever had entered the hangar seemed to have heard her

and slowly approached us.

Seeing that this was her chance, she rattled off one lie after another. “This dork suddenly demanded that I give him the key to my ship, and when I refused, he shot me! Hurry up and arrest him!”

However, the figure who had approached us didn’t seem shocked by her account, and they didn’t seem to have come to rescue her.

“That’s strange,” the person said. “Young lady, didn’t you just ask him to lend his ship to you?”

The person who had just come was…

“Dan?!”

He took out a comb and fixed his hair while looking warily at the woman. “Young lady, I spotted you heading toward the hangar earlier. I figured you were probably planning on stealing some careless merc’s ship,” he said.

When she saw that Dan wasn’t going to act in accordance with her expectations, the woman was furious.

“Why are you siding with this gross dork instead of me?! Usually, when someone comes across a gorgeous, charming woman like yours truly who’s been knocked to the ground, anyone in their right mind would unconditionally side with her, right?!” she snapped at Dan, showing that she had a fair amount of confidence in her own looks.

Still, the places where I’d shot her still had to hurt. I had to give it to her for remaining so articulate in spite of that.

Could it be that she’s producing so much adrenaline that she can hardly feel the pain anymore because of her rage?

“That’s ’cause I overheard you asking him to lend you his ship the first time, young lady. Also, it’s not like being gorgeous and being charming always go hand in hand, ya know?”

As she continued to fume, Dan met her anger with a nihilistic grin, denying the existence of what she thought was her greatest weapon.

“You’ve got to be kidding! Can you name one thing about me that *isn’t* charming?!” she loudly shot back.

Wait, she definitely still can’t move because of the pain, right? It’s starting to look like she might run away, so I’d better keep my eye on her.

“Sorry for the wait. Where’s the culprit?”

Just then, Detective Royman arrived with a squad of police

officers in tow.

As if she thought this was her chance to turn the tables, the woman started screaming again. “Help! These bastards shot me! These two are the criminals!” she insisted.

As the police squad approached us, a look of triumph appeared on her face. However, the police didn’t proceed to come to her rescue. Instead, they cuffed her.

She wasn’t just going to accept that, of course. “Wait a minute! Why are you putting *me* in handcuffs?! That dork over there is the one who shot me! And that man with the slicked-back hair is his accomplice!”

“Unfortunately, you’re the one we’ll be restraining and arresting. We have video and audio recordings from his Wrist-Com. As soon as we received the details, my officers and I started checking all the colony’s surveillance camera footage, starting with the hangar. We quickly found footage of you pointing your gun at him first. And we also found evidence that you were an accomplice to the murder that took place on the other colony. Do you really think you can talk your way out of this?”

Detective Royman’s indifferent tone of voice, his slight smile, and the gleam in his eyes as he explained all that sent a jolt of terror through the woman.

When she fell silent, the detective turned to me. “Thank you for your cooperation. I’ve been told that the murderer himself has been apprehended on the other colony, so the state of alert should be lifted any minute now,” he said.

He reported the situation on the other colony with a different attitude than he had shown the woman. His expression seemed wearier.

And thus the woman—Maerie Dilliban, a member of the ideological group opposed to the empire—was arrested.

Later, I learned that while I had been sure that the great detective had solved the case after all, the forensic investigators had been the real winners.

It had just so happened that the amateur investigator on the scene was someone who tended to get a little lost.

Although the culprits had been arrested and the police were long gone, when it was time for the nobles to head home, they scattered in all directions like baby spiders. This was completely

different to how they'd arrived. I guessed they didn't want to hang around the colony after a homicide.

Once the guests were all gone, the head of security, Mr. Doetas Twill, told us that there would be a debriefing session on both the incident and our job. Thankfully, the client promised to pay us our full original fees plus a bonus for taking out the marauders.

After our work was complete and that meeting had ended, the mercenaries began to go home. Once most of the others had left, I departed from the colony.

It took a little over eighteen hours to travel home from the colony orbiting Planet Ratakasa via an interstellar gate. By the time I finally returned to Planet Ittsu after such a prolonged journey, not only was it the middle of the night, but Old Man Lohnes wasn't around either. I exited the guild building without stopping at reception. Hailing a passing taxi, I headed straight home and immediately went to sleep.

I spent the entire next day cleaning, buying groceries, and enjoying some anime.

On the following day, however, I headed to the guild to go through the procedure to get paid.

"That was a nasty incident you got caught up in. I mean, when a nobleman is killed, there are still plenty of idiot nobles who will unconditionally try to make any old commoner out to be the culprit," muttered Old Man Lohnes as he went through the procedure so I could be paid.

"I've been thinking of asking someone to exorcise my demons..." I said.

After all, I'd had a gun pointed at me so many times in such a short span of time. I was really starting to wonder if something evil was haunting me.

While I was pondering that, Lohnes spoke up again.

"Oh yeah. About that girl, Ako Shandelar..."

My commiserations had prompted him to bring her up.

According to him, during her interrogation, she had said a number of things that would cause most people to doubt her sanity.

"It's that commoner's fault for defying me, a noblewoman."

"What's wrong with a noblewoman like me pointing a gun at a commoner?"

“Of course commoners should offer up all of their assets to nobles.”

However, it had been pointed out to her that she was no longer a noble. And on top of that, when she had been shown a copy of the imperial writ issued by the empress explicitly stripping Ako’s father—Ulcamus Shandelar, the head of House Shandelar—of the title of baron, she apparently had begun to shout and lash out at the police.

Though it seemed certain that she would be sentenced to time in prison, the possibility of her being confined to a mental health facility in the imperial capital had also been raised.

“Well, here’s your payment for the mission. Nice work.”

By the time he’d finished telling me about Ako Shandelar, Old Man Lohnes had finished the process to transfer my pay.

Just as promised, I was no longer getting just the initial fixed amount of 360,000 credits. Instead, I had earned 450,000 credits.

NPC No. 69: “Never mind that, just come home once in a while. Don’t worry! I’ve made sure none of the old bats in the neighborhood will say anything bad about you!”

Since Old Man Lohnes and I had finished chatting at the same time my payment had gone through, I decided to head straight to the bank.

My reason for doing so was that the money I’d earned from selling those fighters after having let the Hans Brothers get away was still stored in my Wrist-Com, and I still needed to send that money home to my parents.

In other words, I was currently holding 12 million credits in excess of my living expenses. And once I had remembered that, I wanted to get to the bank to deposit that money as quickly as possible.

On my way there, I was interrupted by an unexpected phone call.

I checked the screen, wondering who it could be, and saw it was my dad calling.

“Hello, dad,” I said. “This is sudden. What’s up?”

“Hey, where are you right now?”

“I was just heading home after taking care of a lot of paperwork at the guild. Why do you ask?”

“If you were at the guild, you’re on Planet Ittsu right now, yeah? In that case, do you wanna meet up? I’m actually on Ittsu myself at the moment, here for your mom’s niece’s wedding.”

Now that he had mentioned it, I looked at my father on the monitor carefully. I noticed he wasn’t in his work clothes or everyday clothes, but a suit.

I thought that I might have met my mom’s niece when I was a kid, but I had no definitive memory of having done so. Though, of course, my dad and my mom had to have known her pretty well. At any rate, it had been a while since I had seen them. So as long as they were here, I wanted to make the effort.

“Sure. Where are you right now?”

“We’ve just arrived at Palbea Station.”

That station was the public transport terminal closest to the Mercenaries Guild.

“You’re close by. In that case, how about meeting at Pegasus Meteor in a little while? That’s a family restaurant in the area. I’ve just got some errands to take care of, but those should only take about forty minutes. If it looks like I’ll be delayed, I’ll call you back.”

“All right. See ya later.”

After hanging up with my dad, I went straight to the bank. Then, after depositing 8 million credits, which was two-thirds of my total earnings from the two missions—selling the spoils of the previous mission and the payment from the most recent one—I headed to the family restaurant where I’d agreed to meet my parents.

When I arrived at Pegasus Meteor, I saw that my mom and dad had gotten there before me and were already seated at a booth.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said.

“Long time no see, John. Glad to see you looking so well,” my mom said.

“Hey, mom. You’ve…lost some weight.”

“All thanks to karaoke and working in the field every day!” she said.

My mom was so much slimmer than the last time I’d seen her and practically looked like a different person.

I wonder if she actually just got that slimming treatment. Well, as long as she’s healthy, I guess that’s not a problem.

I have something way more important to talk about.

“Oh yeah, dad. Any news about the debt?”

“Yeah. With the money you sent me, I was able to pay it all off, the principal and the interest. Here’s the written acknowledgment.”

The document my dad showed me was the real thing, no doubt about it.

Hold up. Dad, have you just been walking around with that on your Versitool?

“Glad to hear it’s finally paid off,” I said. “Good thing they didn’t try any dirty tricks to stop you, huh?”

Even though the debt had been transferred to an upstanding

financial institution, I'd kept an eye out in case the guys who had dropped it onto his shoulders in the first place were to find fault with his repayments. I felt grateful that things hadn't turned out that way.

"I know it's been hard on you too. You had to give up on college because of me," said my dad with an apologetic look on his face. "But, well, thanks to that, you ended up in a lucrative line of work. That's something to be thankful for."

Over the years, I had thought, *Coulda, shoulda, woulda.* But now, I thought that even if I *had* gone to college, I probably wouldn't have found a decent job.

The really favorable positions were all monopolized by the nobility, and a lot of other places hired based on the candidates' looks. There were also plenty of places that expected new hires to hit the ground running with no training or that paid a pittance despite forcing onerous workloads on their employees.

And above all, I was simply lacking in any appealing attributes.

Compared to other jobs, the life of a mercenary—one where appearances had nothing to do with success, your abilities were valued above all else, and the high risk was coupled with the promise of high rewards—was much more desirable.

In a way, the incident I had gotten caught up in during my first year of high school had opened the door for my future.

While I was pondering that, my mom had ordered a chocolate parfait. "Never mind that, just come home once in a while," she said to me. "Don't worry! I've made sure none of the old bats in the neighborhood will say anything bad about you!"

What she meant by this was that after hearing that I had become a mercenary, a lot of old ladies in her neighborhood had started spreading all kinds of nasty rumors about me. I didn't even know what those old bats looked like. But that fact was the reason I had avoided visiting my parents' house.

Actually, I was more worried about what my mom had done to keep them quiet...

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I told them, 'Our son sends money home three times a month, but that's not all. This month, he sent us 2 million in one go!' When they heard that, they completely changed their attitude."

Why are you acting like I send that kind of money all the time?

They know I don't send them that much every time, right?

I guess mom couldn't stomach them bad-mouthing me either.

Well, I couldn't object too strongly. After all, the amount I was about to hand over to them was only going to exacerbate things.

"Ah, right, here's your share for this month. I put aside a third of my pay from my last two jobs."

"I don't have any more debt, you know," my dad said reproachfully as I held out my Wrist-Com.

I think he really wanted to say, *The debt's paid off, so what are you doing?!*

"It'll help give me motivation to keep on working, so take it," I told him. I had no intention of stopping the contributions for the time being, so I gently proffered my Wrist-Com once more.

"All right... Well, we're very grateful," said my dad with a sigh, accepting the transfer with a look of resignation.

Over my past two jobs, I had made 12 million credits—11.55 million from one and 450,000 from the other. I was giving him one-third of all that, which amounted to 4 million credits.

My mom seemed pretty startled by the amount. "I can't believe my eyes... And this is only one-third?"

"In just two missions, you easily surpassed my annual salary from my days as an office worker..." My dad looked crestfallen.

Yeah, the pay's good, but I do *have to put my life on the line.*

My parents' brains seemed to be frozen for a moment, but after they reactivated, we had a fun family meal for the first time in ages.

As soon as we finished our main meals, my mother ordered another parfait. I took that opportunity to dash to the bathroom.

Looks like she's already relapsing...

When I came out of the washroom and stepped into the corridor, I saw someone wearing a hood enter the restaurant.

It's the middle of the day, it's not raining, and this isn't one of the colder seasons. There must be some reason, in spite of all that, this person's wearing a hood, I thought.

The new patron turned to stare at me. Then, they suddenly crouched down and took their hands out of the pockets of their parka. The person had a gun in one hand, and I got a glimpse of pink hair around the edge of their hood.

The moment I saw those details, I ducked back into the bathroom to hide.

At the same time, I heard a deafening roar. A nearby couch was blown apart, and a scream echoed throughout the restaurant.

Fortunately, no one had been sitting on the couch when this happened.

She should either be in jail or in the hospital. What's she doing here?

I had a lot of questions, but after concealing myself behind a wall, I simply said, "Didn't you get arrested?"

I was hoping to keep the attention of Ako Shandelar—Pinky—focused on me.

"That was nothing more than false imprisonment!" she yelled. "For a noblewoman like me—the daughter of a baron—why should asking a commoner to give me all his money or firing a gun at him be considered a crime?!"

Pinky still seemed to be under the impression that she had done nothing except assert her God-given rights.

"Is that why you came and attacked me?"

"I only came in here by coincidence, but this is *perfect*. This is my chance to eliminate you, a peasant who defied orders from me, a baron's daughter! And I'll take care of that insolent girl from guild reception too!"

Looks like I really can't talk any sense into her. And I'm pretty sure that by that "girl" *from reception, she means Zaystall.*

At any rate, if the staff and the other customers here can get away and contact the police while I'm drawing Pinky's attention, I'd be grateful.

But...judging by the look in Pinky's eyes, there'll be collateral damage if I let her run amok. Perhaps I'll have to deal with this swiftly.

I drew my blaster from its holster and took off the safety, which I was always sure to keep on when I was in town.

NPC No. 70: “If you ever get sick of it, just come home. But until then, keep up the good work.”

Come to think of it, I should’ve just called the police myself. Why did I expect the restaurant staff to do it? Maybe I was just panicking since my mom and dad are here.

At any rate, I need to draw Ako Shandelar’s attention.

“If I’m the one you’re after, would you mind stepping outside?” I asked. “This isn’t fair to everyone else in the restaurant.”

“The only people here are peasants, right? I couldn’t care less about what happens to them. I’m fine with killing a few. But if you don’t want that to happen, then hurry up and let me kill you instead!”

This is really bad.

I thought I’d be able to buy some time until the police arrive, but that’s looking impossible.

Just drawing her aggro for this long has given a few patrons time to escape from the restaurant, but that being said, I can’t predict when she might point her gun at a customer and start firing…

I picked up a silver tray that happened to have fallen on the ground. As I emerged from behind the corner, I hurled it at Pinky, obscuring her field of vision, and aimed my pistol at her right thigh. I pulled the trigger.

It would have been better to aim at her hand that was holding her pistol, but I wasn’t that skilled.

At first, I had thought about aiming for her torso, but if Pinky were wearing a reflex jacket that could reflect blaster beams, hitting her there would result in collateral damage.

A reflex jacket covered the entire upper body except for the head and hands. If I were to aim for her face, that could take out an eye and probably knock her out, and even if it didn’t hit her, she’d certainly flinch. But if my beam missed, it could hit one of the walls in the restaurant and send shrapnel flying everywhere. The beam itself might even hit someone else, which would be awful. And even if I were to hit her, it’d look like something out of a splatter film in here.

There were parents with their young kids in this restaurant. I couldn't kill someone in front of them, so I gave up on aiming for her head.

Pinky knocked the tray out of the air with the butt of her pistol.

In the same instant, my blaster round hit her squarely in her right thigh.

"Gah!" she screamed and doubled over.

Of course, that alone wasn't enough. As soon as she doubled over, I took the opportunity to get closer to her, intent on shooting her somewhere else in the leg to force her to drop to the floor. After that happened, I'd be able to knock the gun out of her hand.

But just as I approached her, a beam from somewhere else hit Pinky in the head. Her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed to the floor.

"John! Are you okay?"

After seeing Pinky collapse, my dad ran over to me, looking worried.

"I'm fine, but forget about me!" I said. "We need to preserve the crime scene, and this woman might still be dangerous if she gets up, so stay back!"

I made sure to tell all the other customers still inside to keep their distance and to leave everything as it was as well. There was still a chance that Pinky might regain consciousness too.

I took a napkin from a nearby table and used it to pick up Pinky's pistol. After that, I turned to look in the direction the beam that had hit Pinky in the head had come from. I saw a woman wearing a suit with a tight skirt, and she walked over to me as she returned her own gun to its holster.

"Sorry for not taking care of her sooner," the woman said to me. "I couldn't get a clean shot from where I was sitting at first, so I had to move closer."

Now that the woman had approached me, I could see that she had blue eyes and long, curly, light chestnut-colored hair that was almost blonde, tied up above her shoulders. She was also quite the beauty.

I expressed my gratitude as I holstered my pistol. "No, you really saved me. Thank you very much."

Then, with a blare of sirens, the police and an ambulance arrived. Pinky was then cuffed and loaded onto a stretcher

before being carried away.

Once the police had finished their forensics work, the detective spoke to me. “Hi there. Who called this in?”

“That was me.”

“Name and occupation?”

“John Ouzos. I’m a mercenary.”

The police probably suspected that I’d had something to do with the altercation.

Well, that’s to be expected. It would be strange if they didn’t, honestly.

“And who’s this?” said the detective, turning to the woman standing beside me.

“I’m Lunaris Bradwell. I’m a rear admiral in the Imperial Army with the noble rank of count. I serve as the commander of the Fifth Squadron, the crusader squadron of the Central Fleet. I’m off duty today and was having lunch with a friend.”

When we heard this, the detective and I both opened our eyes wide. We could hardly believe that she was really *that* Lunaris Bradwell, the commander of the Fifth Squadron.

“Well, I’ll still need to hear everyone’s statements,” the detective said. “I’ll only take a moment of your time.”

Under instructions from that detective, who also seemed to be in charge of the investigation, a number of other detectives and officers started interviewing the patrons and staff members in the restaurant.

Finally, I found some time to talk to my parents.

“Are you sure you’re all right, John?” asked my mom.

“Did you do something to provoke that woman?” my dad asked.

“The truth is that she decided to take out her frustrations on me when she saw I was making more money as a mercenary,” I said, telling my concerned parents what’d been going on.

“That is unfortunate…” said dad.

“Some people just can’t be reasoned with,” mom added.

They both seemed to believe my story.

Within the Mercenaries Guild, a lot of people never listened to what you had to say and would stick to their own assumptions instead. I was really grateful to have such understanding parents.

“Normally, I carry out all my missions from inside my ship, so I almost never have to stick my neck out like this.”

“I kind of feel like asking you to quit right now. Is that out of the question?” asked my mom.

“Honestly…I think this is the only job I can do,” I admitted.

My mom still looked concerned, but there was no way I could quit now. While I knew I would continue to make her worry, I couldn’t just give it up.

“If you ever get sick of it, just come home. But until then, keep up the good work.” And judging from my dad’s expression, he was actually quite pleased.

Everyone who was in the restaurant that day, including my parents, gave the following testimony:

Pinky had drawn her gun first.

She had called us all peasants and stated, “I’m fine with killing a few.”

They were all in agreement on those points.

Furthermore, the security cameras inside the restaurant had captured video and audio of the entire altercation.

And, on top of all that, there was the testimony of Rear Admiral Lunaris Bradwell—commander of the Fifth Squadron, the crusader squadron of the Imperial Army’s Central Fleet. Thanks to this and the fact that the police had also received an internal order to search for Pinky, it was quickly decided that I had acted in self-defense and was innocent of any wrongdoing.

Incidentally, the gun the rear admiral was carrying was a Tri-Shot made by the Neosouth Corporation. That gun could switch between three firing modes—raygun, blaster, and paralyzer. Since members of the Imperial Army were licensed to arrest criminals during emergencies, they had officially adopted the Tri-Shot to take advantage of its versatility. That being said, I’d heard that most soldiers kept their Tri-Shots as backups and usually carried their own preferred handguns.

The rear admiral had stated that she had only used her Tri-Shot in paralyzer mode because there had been children around.

As for the scene of the incident—the Palbea Station location of the Pegasus Meteor family restaurant chain—the manager declared that every customer caught up in the commotion would eat for free. They also promised to reinforce the restaurant’s security measures and expressed a wish for everyone to dine there again in the future. This explanation, apology, and resolution were all stated with the utmost courtesy.

Thus, the situation was entirely resolved, and we were finally free to go.

☆☆☆

Aside: Ako Shandelar

When I regained consciousness, I was underwater.

It looked like I'd been placed inside a regenerative healing capsule, and a mask had been placed over my mouth to allow me to breathe.

I guess this is to heal my leg since that peasant shot me. I think a capsule is a bit overboard for a wound like that, but I guess it's only natural for a noblewoman like me to receive the highest standard of care.

Thanks to that peasant, I've been treated like a criminal. But right after I was put in jail, someone helped me escape and furnished me with clothes, money, a gun, and a reflex jacket.

The peasants who offered up these gifts to me asked me to go meet their leader, but if he's another peasant, he can come meet me himself.

In any case, the fact that I was offered this salvation means that God is on my side after all!

After my father, a baron who had also owned the successful company Shandelar & Co., was arrested on false charges, he had lost his title and his business.

Because of this, we had lost our manor and had to live in a dingy apartment building. We had to lead an impoverished life.

Since I was luckily very confident in my skills with a gun and a battlecraft, I had decided to start a new career as a mercenary. I knew that, with my talents, I would reach the highest level—King rank—in less than a year. And once I reached the highest rank, I was going to make that wicked empress who had ruined my father with her false charges crawl on the ground at my feet!

But despite my ambitions, the Mercenaries Guild wouldn't let me rise above Knight rank.

I don't meet the requirements to take the exam? Why should I have to meet your stupid requirements?!

That girl in reception was another one of the empress's minions; that's why she wouldn't let me take the exam!

When my treatment is complete, I'll have to go and attack her first.

Come to think of it, there was another pair of peasants who got promoted ahead of me. Federhelm. I think I'll allow them to become my subordinates. I bet they'll cry tears of joy too.

This tragic heroine's magnificent revenge is only just beginning!

Just as I was thinking this, I heard a voice outside my capsule. It was one of the peasants who'd given me all of those gifts.



So you're already here to rescue me? What wonderful loyalty. I have to commend you.

What? What did he just say?!

Huh? I feel strange. My pulse is…racing.

For some reason…everything's going dark…before…my…eyes.

☆☆☆

Aside: Suspicious Men

"Are you sure about this? Throwing away our pawn already, I mean."

"She won't listen to our orders. Useless tools must be disposed of. Besides, the commander of the Fifth Squadron saw her face. Don't you see? We can't even send her in to blow herself up now."

"Right. I guess there's nothing to do but throw her away. Well, shall we do it the normal way?"

"Yeah. If you add this to the IV drip, everyone will think she just died of a heart attack, and there'll be no trace left of the drug we mixed in there… There, it's all injected. All right, let's head back and have a drink."

"Yeah, let's."

NPC No. 71: “Oh? What’s this? There’s a fat dork over here! I thought I told you before to stay in your lane.”

The police finished interviewing me about Pinky’s assault, and I was permitted to leave. My mom and dad had escaped injury-free too, so they were free to go home as well.

It did occur to me that it had been a while since we’d seen each other, however.

“Mom and dad, what are you doing next?” I asked. “If you’re going shopping or sightseeing, I’d be happy to carry your things for you.” I even suggested that my wallet would be open to them as well.

My mom gently rejected my offer. “That’s all right. Your father and I haven’t been out like this in a while. We’d like to enjoy some quality time with just the two of us. Besides, you’ve already filled our war chest.”

Well, I guess it wouldn’t be good to disturb a married couple on vacation.

“All right. Have a good time, then.”

And so my parents headed downtown together.

At their age, there’s no chance that I’m about to have a new brother or sister, right…?

In any case, I think it’s time to head home for the day and sleep. I’m tired.

I got a good night’s sleep, and the next day, I stopped by the Mercenaries Guild to find that it was the same as always.

“Looks like you were born under an unlucky star,” said Old Man Lohnes.

“I think guys like Arthur, Lambert, and Yuri—you know, the protagonists of the world—have a patent on lines like that.”

Lohnes smiled as he poked fun at me, but if you were to ask me, it was no laughing matter. And when he’d had enough of joking around, Lohnes’s expression suddenly turned serious.

“About Pinky,” he began. “It turned out that someone helped her escape.”

This answered one of the questions I’d had during my last

encounter with her.

"That figures."

"And, after you shot her—and after the rear admiral hit her with her paralyzer—she was placed in a capsule to treat her wounds. She apparently died of a heart attack during her treatment."

When I heard him say that, I was suddenly struck with fear.

"She was obviously gotten rid of, right?" I asked.

Old Man Lohnes also looked distressed. "Thanks to her personality, yeah. I think whoever helped her break out intended to use her as a pawn, but I guess she had her own ideas."

Now that it's come to this—no, even if it hadn't—it's probably better if I don't do anything else about Pinky. Besides, if I have to deal with any more emotional distress, I honestly might lose the will to keep on working.

That being said, it's not like I can afford not to work...

"I'd like to take on a mission without any combat..."

I guess this is what a compromise would look like.

"If that's what you want, it'll be a lock-in contract for a period of one month, and the pay'll only be so-so. Here's one request with no combat whatsoever. It's just not up on the bulletin board yet."

Old Man Lohnes showed me a job description that hadn't yet been posted.

The job in question would take place at an archaeological excavation site on Planet Tosray. The principal task was to pilot a container vessel transporting the excavation crew between their base camp and the excavation site, along with their equipment and anything they dug up. Outside of that, I'd be left on standby at their base camp. There was also the possibility of some odd jobs popping up from time to time.

Apparently, they had hired a dedicated pilot, but after he'd been injured, an inexperienced member of their staff had been piloting the ship.

"Locked in for a month, huh...?"

"But it's guaranteed not to involve any combat," Lohnes noted. "The scenery is nice there, and so is the water and air."

When I looked at what was currently listed on the bulletin board, it was all pirate hunts and escort jobs.

"Well, you're right, all the other jobs do look like they might involve some combat. I don't quite feel ready to go today—think

I could head out tomorrow?"

"Sure. I'm sure you have preparations to make first."

And so I accepted the job and exited the Mercenaries Guild.

Hmm... If I'm locked in for a whole month, this might be a good time to buy a bunch of light novels and manga I haven't read yet. I can pick up some anime data cards too.

Ah, this would also be a good time to reread some older series or back issues of series that are still running.

I felt like it might also be nice to revisit *It's Just Wrong That My Big Sister Is So Cute*, *I Have No Friends*, or *Heaven-Piercing Garon Baron* for the first time in a while.

In any case, I should go to Animember.

At Animember, I bought the latest volume of *Assassin × Family*. Then, at Seizaban, I found the data card box set of the *Cowgirl Swing* anime and decided to buy it while I could.

Then, after I stepped out of Animember, someone unexpected called out to me.

"What a coincidence, Captain Ouzos."

It was WVS-09 Rossweisse, the sentient ancient superweapon and light battlecraft who had recently acquired a bioroid body.

"Ah, hi. Well, I'd better be going..."

This was the outcome I'd feared, so I decided to get out of there right away.

Rossweisse had caught hold of me, however. "Hold on. Why are you avoiding me?"

"If people see me with Federhelm's partner, they might make up some odd rumors. Isn't Lambert with you today?"

It would be genuinely dangerous if I were seen alone with Rossweisse. I wished she could have at least brought Lambert along to give me some plausible deniability.

"He was, but he just wandered off with that Lebin Grissle he met the other day to visit some shopping district..."

Looks like I can't count on him, then.

In that case, I guess I have no choice but to stay and talk to her. If someone sees me forcefully turn her down, that would be even more dangerous.

"So, is there something I can help you with?"

"There is something I'd like to ask you about, but I don't feel like standing here and talking about it. Can we talk in there instead?" she asked, pointing to that trendy chain café I'd had so much trouble with.

I did my best to withstand the stares we were getting from the staff and other customers. Rossweisse ordered a Strawberry Yada Yada Frappuccino, and I ordered a tall blended coffee—which was just a medium-sized one.

Then, once we were seated, Rossweisse started talking.

"Captain Ouzos, I'd like to ask you a direct question," she began. "When I first made contact with you, why did you turn down my offer?"

This surprised me. She had asked quite a few people besides me and had gotten turned down, so I had figured that she knew why.

She continued. "The Ebony Devil, Albert Sirclud, already had a high-spec vessel of his own. Kind of like an inferior version of me. And the leader of the imperial guard, General Kielect Erundibar, has enough subordinates that he didn't need me. So I can see why I wasn't needed by them and why they turned me down. It was uncomfortable, but I understood. But you're different. Not only do you not have a great ship or any talented subordinates, but you didn't even give me a reason for rejecting my proposal. I'd like you to tell me why."

While I had certainly had a reason in mind when I'd turned her down, I hadn't actually said it out loud.

If she wants to know so badly, I guess I don't mind telling her. She won't get offended, right?

"As long as you promise you won't get angry."

"I'll make a rational judgment."

After I had taken the necessary precautions, Rossweisse gave me the go-ahead, so I decided to tell her why I turned her down.

"If you've ever looked around the guild, I'm sure you've noticed this, but I'm despised by a certain subset of the staff and mercenaries."

"I did get that impression. But they're all just stupid humans who can't see your true worth," spat Rossweisse.

"So, if I ever showed up with a beautiful, high-powered ship like you, they'd just try to steal you from me."

"Don't you think I could easily deal with any violence?"

"If you were surrounded by enough of them, you'd have no chance of winning. People like that are great at ganging up on others," I explained.

Besides, I'm no hero. No one would come to my rescue.

"They could also use authority to steal you. A noble could

insist that you actually originally belonged to him. Then, all he'd have to do is give the police and a high-ranking judge a little *sweetener*, and you'd be in his clutches. As for me, after getting arrested, I'd have nothing to look forward to but a mysterious death in prison."

"So you rejected me to avoid that?"

"More or less," I said.

"I see. Now I understand." In keeping with her earlier declaration, Rossweisse didn't get angry. In fact, she actually looked relieved. "So you weren't dissatisfied with my capabilities?"

Well, for a battlecraft like her, I guess there's nothing more devastating than being told she's useless.

Though…the main reason I turned her down was actually that she was willing to change pilots without a second thought.

"Oh, right. There's actually something I'd like to ask you too," I said.

"What is it?"

"I'm about to head to an archaeological site on Planet Tosray for a mission. You wouldn't know anything about that place, would you?"

Since Rossweisse was an ancient weapon herself, I was curious to see if she might know something about the ruins on Tosray.

"I don't know much about them. I only know that a certain privileged class designated the area to be preserved for its natural beauty, but aside from the flat land on which their villas and military bases are situated, they terraformed the rest of the planet into mountain ranges. To summarize, I only know that a chosen few have made it so no one besides them can build there…"

Hey, isn't that more than enough information?

Either way, that was Planet Tosray, home to the excavation site that would be my workplace for the next month.

The composition of the atmosphere made it breathable for humans, and there was plenty of water too, so there was a lot of foliage. But one hundred percent of the land was made up of hard rocks, and only one percent of that was flat. So apart from that limited bit of land, the only places on the planet one could live were on the ocean or in the air.

While that tiny portion of habitable land was being developed,

an ancient ruin had been discovered. Further work had been canceled, but there were reportedly plans to turn it into a tourist attraction next.

I wonder what the academics would do if they knew the present environment on Planet Tosray was all the doing of the rich and powerful.

While I was pondering that, I suddenly became aware of a voice belonging to someone I never wished to hear from again.

“Oh? What’s this? There’s a fat dork over here! I thought I told you before to stay in your lane.”

It was Arodich Ireblugas, the son of the president of the Ireblugas Corporation. He was supposedly studying abroad in order to take over the family business one day and was enjoying quite a lavish lifestyle.

NPC No. 72: “Even with the safety on, you should never draw your pistol in the middle of town.”

I had just found myself face-to-face with Arodich Ireblugas.

Even thinking back to my student days, he had been a man utterly abhorred by a portion of the student body at school. He had been like a snake, or maybe a scorpion.

He had always worn striking, expensive-looking suits, shoes, and watches. Since he was handsome and rich, the looser girls had flocked to him, and he’d had an entourage that hung around him in the hopes of catching his leftovers.

And even today, he was appearing before me accompanied by several people, including women. While the lineup had changed, he was still traveling with an entourage.

If I had to be honest, while I had just mentally compared him to a snake or scorpion, I bet I’d feel more affectionate toward one of those.

“Didn’t I tell you this is no place for a fat dork like you to hang out? What are you doin’ here?” he said, addressing me in the same clearly derisive attitude he’d had when we were still at school.

“Someone from work invited me.”

I had no answer to his question besides that.

After all, it was Rossweisse who said we should talk here. I still wouldn’t come here on my own, but if it’s for work, what can I do?

However, this guy—Ireblugas—didn’t seem to understand this.

“For work? That makes no difference. Just tell whoever you’re with, ‘This café doesn’t suit me,’” he said with a sneer. Then, he peered at Rossweisse’s face in an uncivilized manner. “Hey! Why’s a dork like you even with a classy girl like this?”

This juxtaposition seemed to make him even angrier, to the point where he kicked me in the leg.

He proceeded to lean in close to Rossweisse. “Say, girly. Forget about this fat nerd and come along with us instead,” he said, wasting no time in making a move.

Without even turning her head to look at Ireblugas, Rossweisse said dismissively, “Stop bothering us. We’re trying to have a discussion about our work.”

Although what we were doing was closer to having a private chat than a work meeting, she backed up my story. Maybe it was because Ireblugas really was bothering her.

But he paid her protests no mind. “If you want to talk about work, you can have a far more meaningful discussion with me. After all, I’m the next president of the Ireblugas Corporation. Even for the sake of your business, you’re better off dating me.”

In her annoyance, Rossweisse whipped out her mercenary registration badge—emblazoned with the mark indicating Bishop rank—and shoved it in Ireblugas’s face. “I don’t need you to do my job. You’re bothering us, so get out of here,” she said while glaring at him.

Then, for some reason, Ireblugas started giving me the evil eye again.

“You fat dork, this is bullshit! You put her up to this, didn’t you?!” he insisted unreasonably.

“No. When would I have had the time?” I pointed out.

We hadn’t been talking about Ireblugas before he had come up to us, and I hadn’t had the chance to discuss anything with Rossweisse since he’d shown up.

Well, I guess I can’t expect this guy to notice a thing like that.

“There’s no way a woman would ever reject me unless the likes of you filled her head with crap first!”

With that, he finally snapped and suddenly drew his gun. He brandished a high-caliber handgun called the Sandhawk from the Raemitted Industrial Corporation.

To cut a long story short, it was a ridiculously powerful blaster. The majority of its use was on the battlefield or during expeditions on uncharted worlds. Though it wasn’t illegal to own one with the proper license, it wasn’t meant to be carried by civilians in the middle of a busy city.

“Scared now, huh? This can blow apart something the size of an air-car without a problem! Though someone as poor as you could never afford one!” he yelled.

Indeed, it is quite an expensive gun, but I wonder if he can handle it. I sure can’t.

Weapons like ray guns and blasters usually had next to no recoil, and some models had none at all. However, the Sandhawk

had a fair bit. You could say this made it flawed as a blaster, but it had plenty of fans who said they liked the power and the kickback.

Ireblugas held the Sandhawk with one hand and shoved it in my face. “Y’know, I may not be a mercenary, but if we’re talking about strength, I’d definitely be King rank! If you understand that, then get down on your knees! Hurry up, you pile of lard!”

I didn’t know on what basis he’d made that judgment, but I was certain that he’d never beat a working mercenary at King rank. In fact, he probably couldn’t even beat me.

The thing was, thanks to my training in shooting and hand-to-hand combat—not to mention my *actual* combat experience, despite spending most of my time in a battle craft—I’d realized I was able to approach a fight more calmly than the average person.

Anyway, I had just noticed something crucial, and that prompted me to get out of my chair to square off with Ireblugas. But before I could, Rossweisse was already standing in front of him.

“Huh? What’s this?” asked Ireblugas. He grinned slightly as he pointed his gun at Rossweisse. “So you’re going to get down on your knees instead?”

Instead, Rossweisse applied pressure to the inside of Ireblugas’s elbow joint on the arm that was holding the gun. Then, she pushed on the outside of his arm to launch it, and the gun, right into his face. After that, she wrenched the gun out of his hand, grabbed his arm again, and launched him toward his entourage.

Ireblugas tumbled to the floor at the feet of the members of his posse.

Rossweisse pointed the muzzle of the Sandhawk she’d just swiped from him at the group of his men and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The gun emitted nothing but a clicking sound.

“Even with the safety on, you should never draw your pistol in the middle of town,” said Rossweisse, before breaking down the Sandhawk as one might do for maintenance in the blink of an eye. Once it was in pieces, she returned it to Ireblugas.

I bet it’ll be hard for someone who can barely handle a gun to put that back together.

“This is your last warning. You’re bothering us, so get lost. If

you insist on hanging around, you won't get off so lightly."

Rossweisse glared at Ireblugas, looking pretty annoyed at this point. It looked like he'd really struck a nerve.

When Ireblugas and his entourage saw the fire in her eyes, their expressions turned frightened.

"Shit! We're going, but only 'cause I'm not feeling so good!" cried Ireblugas bitterly before gathering up the pieces of his gun and leaving the café.

After waiting for a moment to make sure Ireblugas was really gone, Rossweisse turned to me and bowed her head. "I'm terribly sorry, Captain Ouzos. You must have wanted to subdue him yourself, but such creatures simply rub me the wrong way..."

"I'm the one who should apologize. You got caught up in my problems."

Rossweisse had just gotten mixed up in one of my conflicts, but she not only acted apologetic—she was even saying she was sorry. Still, from the look on her face, I could tell that she was actually feeling refreshed.

She must have found him really annoying... I totally get that.

"Who was he, anyway?" she asked.

"Just a classmate from my high school days," I explained. "We were never friends, though."

"What a pain in the neck. Why not incapacitate him?"

"If I tried that and he shot me, he would be able to claim he did so in self-defense."

"Next time he picks a fight with you, hold off until he shoots first. Then, you can thoroughly incapacitate him in self-defense!"

Rossweisse's expression told me that she had been seriously contemplating doing just that.

After parting ways with Rossweisse, I went to a hardware store to stock up on water and other provisions for my ship. I asked the store to have them delivered to the guild hangar.

Then I went to Gonzales's place to pay for some information about Planet Tosray before picking up some ingredients for lunch and dinner that day. I also bought some premade side dishes nearby in the Black Market Shopping District.

Incidentally, the neighborhood butcher was selling a new kind of potato croquette, advertised as "Golden Bliss Manifested by Pulverising Life from a New World."

There was also a new pork cutlet the butcher called "The

Remains of a Greedy Orc Who Fell in Grease."

I bought a creamed crab croquette named "The Cocoon of a Red-Shelled Sea Beast Who Drowned in Cloudy Waters and Gives Birth to Silence."

Then, on my way back home, I stopped in a convenience store parking lot to call my parents and let them know I'd be away for a while. Once I got home, I started picking out light novels, manga, and anime to take with me to Tosray.

NPC No. 73: “I must say, professional pilots really are amazing. I can’t believe you’re able to fly the ship through this rain, wind, and thunder and keep it so steady. Amateurs like us couldn’t manage that. Is there some kind of trick to it?”

Tosray—a beautiful planet when viewed from outer space with blue seas, green trees, and white clouds.

The makeup of its atmosphere made it breathable for humans, and both water and foliage were abundant, but one hundred percent of its surface sat on very hard bedrock. Not only that, but only about one percent of the land was flat. Apart from that small area, there was nowhere on the planet suitable to establish a decent dwelling without first building bases on the sea or in the sky.

I mused to myself that the plants on this planet must’ve been very strong indeed, as their roots had to penetrate that hard bedrock.

While they had been developing that paltry bit of land, some ancient ruins had been discovered. Though this had brought an end to that construction, someone had raised the idea of reinventing Tosray as a sightseeing planet, with the ruins as its central attraction.

At present, the archaeologists were in the middle of their excavation efforts.

At the same time, researchers were starting to pose various hypotheses to explain how the planet’s surface had ended up with so little usable land. Some suggested that it had always been this way, and others wondered if it might’ve been the result of a war or natural disaster.

I wonder what those researchers would think if they found out the real reason for the planet’s current environment—that a privileged class in its ancient history designated it as a preserve for its natural beauty. They deliberately terraformed its entire surface into mountain ranges except for the low-lying lands where they built their

own villas and military bases... I'd like to see those academics' faces.

The entrance to Planet Tosray was situated upon its seas. On a continental shelf 160 meters below sea level, posts one hundred meters in diameter and twenty thousand meters long had been constructed. There were seven of these, positioned at the corners of a giant hexagon that sat between them. Just 150 meters of each post protruded above the water. Another 160 meters were visible underwater, and the rest of the length went through the ocean floor. The seven posts were fixed in place thirty meters above the water and passed through a circular plate fifty kilometers in diameter.

That plate formed the first level of a colossal artificial offshore city known as Ocean Palace. The city had three levels in all with fifty meters of height separating them.

In the center of the facility was a space elevator leading to the spaceport.

Though this had all been initially set up as a point of departure for those traveling to resorts on the planet's scarce flat land, after ancient ruins had been discovered in several regions, it quickly became a research center and base of operations for excavation crews.

It was for this reason that the city was now replete with basic amenities. There were stores selling excavation tools and replacement parts, batteries for all kinds of computer terminals, food rations, clothing, everyday items, and medical items. Other businesses had popped up too, like restaurants, spas, dry cleaners, and laundromats. But there were no recreational facilities here—no bookstores, arcades, sports gyms, cinemas, or casinos. There *was* a temporary library, but I'd heard it had nothing but historical reference materials.

And though they had built a stadium here as well, it wasn't being used. Well...there were supposedly some people who played amateur baseball in the stadium without permission. In a way, that actually seemed pretty extravagant.

Anyway, as far as the researchers were concerned, anything to do with the ruins was a fun activity, so they didn't need recreation. But the workers they'd hired? They had to be bored out of their minds.

Within this colossal artificial offshore city, a portion of the

third level—the highest one—had been assigned to the research teams. They used it as their base of operations.

Each ruin was being investigated by a different team, and they all had the same objective: to bring anything they unearthed in the ruins back to this research center to conduct all manner of examinations and take measurements.

The investigation team that had hired me for this mission belonged to one Florina Thezu, a professor of archaeology at the University of Imperial City Glorums.

"I've got to say, we're so glad you're here. We can pilot the cargo ship when we have to, but the landings can get a little dicey," Professor Thezu said as she shook my hand.

She was a gorgeous woman in her mid-thirties. Perhaps it was because she was tall with a fetching, athletic figure, but she didn't immediately come across as a university professor to me even though she was wearing her work clothes and boots.

"Right, so you'll just have to drop us off at the work site and pick us up when we're done," she explained. "Once we're at the work site, you're free to hang around if you like, but I don't mind if you come back to the city either."

The cargo ship I'd been asked to pilot was a generation out of date, but it was a very reliable model. It was the Carry-Ace Mark III from the Sunfield Corporation, which was still in popular use.

It might not be as smooth as my trusty Patchwork, but I can handle it all right.

"That being said, we will expect you to be able to come and pick us up when we call you. A map and the coordinates for the excavation site have already been programmed into the ship's computer. See you bright and early tomorrow."

"Will do. I look forward to working with you."

I guess my first job will be to give this cargo ship a proper once-over.

Sunfield Corporation's Carry-Ace Mark III was the most widely used cargo ship model around. It had no major quirks and straightforward controls, so it was easy to maneuver.

While I was inspecting the ship, a female student—presumably one Thezu was supervising—approached while carrying some kind of package. She tripped and ended up throwing the package at me.

"Ah! Sorry!" she yelled. "Are you okay?"

"D-Don't worry, I'm fine..."

I insisted I was all right, but the student continued apologizing as she headed off somewhere.

At that moment, I felt like someone had shot me a piercing look for some reason. And that sensation persisted the entire time I was inspecting the ship.

When I went to work the next day, everything started peacefully. There were no more mystery glares that made me shiver.

After waking up at 6 a.m., I immediately went to inspect the cargo ship again. Once that was finished, I had breakfast.

Next, I conveyed the professor and her excavation crew to the work site. My job was primarily to take them there and pick them up afterward, so I wasn't expected to help out with the excavation itself. Members of the research team who weren't going to the dig site itself busied themselves with restoring or analyzing whatever had been unearthed so far.

During this job, after letting the excavation team out at the site each morning, I would return to Ocean Palace. Unless they called me back, I was free to do as I pleased until their scheduled pickup time, but there were days when I was tasked with delivering machinery or batteries that they needed at the dig site, and when I did, I took the opportunity to look around.

When I'd return to Ocean Palace, I would explore the floating city or download some new light novels, manga, or anime off the Net. It was a really relaxed schedule.

At five o'clock each evening, I went back to the site to pick up the excavation team. Then, after bringing them back to their base, I'd immediately reinspect and refuel the ship.

Once that was done, I was once again free to do as I liked.

One time, the professor invited me to have drinks with the researchers, and I did decide to show up. Unfortunately, they were using so much specialized terminology in their conversations that I couldn't follow them. I also felt that piercing glare the whole time I was there too, so from then on, I excused myself from those outings by reminding them that I was driving the next day.

The researchers' accommodations were in a hotel in the floating city, and they assigned me a room there as well.

You could say that this job was dull, but I was just grateful to be able to spend some time without having to fear for my life.

Today marked three weeks since I'd started this peaceful job.

Things had been looking pretty gloomy since the morning. And I wasn't referring to my interactions with other people—I was talking about the clouds in the sky.

This was my first time seeing such cloudy weather since arriving on this planet, and it looked like it might rain at any moment.

After dropping the professor and her crew off at the usual time, I returned to Ocean Palace. But, no sooner had I arrived back than rain started to fall.

Though this was no doubt partly due to the city being on the sea, the wind was pretty strong as well.

I was just about to have lunch when I got a message from the research team saying that it might be dangerous for them to continue and they'd like to come back early. I headed to the site to pick them up and found that the rain was quite heavy there as well.

After I landed the ship near the cabin where they took their breaks, the professor and her crew hurried on board.

"I have to say, no matter how many times I experience this rain, it's always staggering," the professor said.

"Is that right?"

I learned that the professor and her team, who had come to this planet some time ago, had experienced weather like this plenty of times before.

As the professor directed the others to load the artifacts they'd unearthed onto the ship, she lectured me on the planet's climate. "Sometimes it can go a whole month without raining, but when it starts to rain, it's always like this. Fierce downpours and strong gales howling through the air. Thankfully, it should let up in about three days."

"We've finished packing everything up!" said one of the crew.

"Okay. Let's get going," said the professor.

During the professor's lecture, the crew had finished loading the cargo, so I closed the hatch and took off.

The winds were strong and I could hear thunder rumbling in the distance, so I decided to maintain a low altitude once we were clear of the excavation site. After all, no matter what precautions you take, it sucks to get hit by lightning.

Flying close to the water while trying to keep the ship steady

was starting to test my nerves. It was really quite difficult.

But the professor kept talking to me anyway.

“I must say, professional pilots really are amazing. I can’t believe you’re able to fly the ship through this rain, wind, and thunder and keep it so steady. Amateurs like us couldn’t manage that. Is there some kind of trick to it?” she asked, peering into the cockpit with what seemed like genuine interest.

But for me, piloting this ship was nerve-racking enough without someone peering at me so blithely, almost as if she were looking at some measuring instrument. It was extraordinarily trying for me, both as a pilot and as a rational being.

“Professor, you mustn’t keep chatting to him. He has to concentrate if he’s going to keep the ship this steady in this weather.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that.”

Thanks to the intervention of the female student who’d previously thrown her luggage at me, the professor went away.

Then, after resting a hand on my shoulder, that same student grinned. “Please, just focus on piloting safely.”

She gripped my shoulder with incredible strength.

At that moment, I became certain that all this time, *she* had been the one who’d been giving me that piercing glare.

Just as I was thinking I might be in big trouble, our ship was suddenly enveloped by a blinding light.

“That was lightning,” said the professor.

“We are over the ocean. But this is still better than being up in the air.”

Looks like lightning finally hit us. The ship is fitted with measures to protect us, so no one got hurt, but it’s definitely still better not to get hit at all.

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” I said.

While maintaining all due caution, I opened up the throttle to get us back to Ocean Palace swiftly.

Following the lightning strike, not even the female student dared to bother me again.

NPC No. 74: “The truth is, I forgot that I left some vital research data in the cabin we use as a break room and temporary storehouse! If I don’t have that data, I can’t make any progress with my research!”

When we had safely returned to Ocean Palace and I was inspecting the ship’s hull while the crew unloaded what had been dug up that day, nothing seemed especially wrong with the vessel. However, it had still been struck by lightning, and with the rain putting a stop to excavation for the time being, I thought it might be best to take it in for an overhaul.

Of course, I had to obtain the professor’s permission first.

“Professor. I think the ship’s all right, but would you mind if I took it in for an overhaul?” I asked.

“I suppose not. We won’t be able to do any more excavation for a while, so go right ahead.”

Now that I had her permission, I moved the cargo ship to a repair shop on level one of the city, requested an overhaul, and returned to the research center.

Once I returned, the professor seemed fairly anxious.

“Oh, Ouzos! They haven’t already dismantled the ship, have they?!” she asked.

Surprised by the professor’s desperation, I simply reported the current status of the cargo ship. “They probably have… I did check inside first to make sure you hadn’t forgotten anything, and when I brought it to the repair shop, the mechanics didn’t seem to have much else to do, so they probably got started right away,” I replied.

“The truth is, I forgot that I left some vital research data in the cabin we use as a break room and temporary storehouse! If I don’t have that data, I can’t make any progress with my research!”

If the professor’s expression was anything to go by, the data really was vital.

Even though I had only done it in the interest of safety, I felt

bad for having suggested the overhaul in the first place.

"Shall I go in my ship to grab it?" I suggested.

"Oh! You're a mercenary, so of course you'd have your own ship!" cried the professor, casting an entreating look at my ship. "I'll come with you, since you wouldn't know which file contains the research data anyway, right?"

This was true. I could hardly know what memory drive or file contained the data she needed.

As for my ship—the Patchwork—I hadn't flown it much since arriving on Tosray, but I tried to take it up now and then during my free time in the afternoon. It was bound to be in good condition. Furthermore, since it was my very own ship, I knew its quirks much better, so I should have been able to fly it more steadily than theirs.

On top of that, the rain and the wind had calmed down a little, so the chance of another lightning strike was also reduced. If we were going to go grab that data, this was our chance.

I was just glad that the female student from earlier wasn't around to see us board my ship together.

I'm still scared of what might happen when we get back.

☆☆☆

Aside: Florina Thezu

Good grief, what is the matter with me? I can't believe I forgot the memory drive with that vital research data on it...

Maybe I lost my cool because of the rain? No, I'm just making excuses.

Putting that aside, this ride is a lot less bumpy than the one in the cargo ship on the way back to base earlier. That might be because the storm has died down since then, but there's also the fact that this is his *ship. John Ouzos's personal ship.*

He's probably so used to piloting this ship in his work as a mercenary that it's like an extension of his body.

After a flight that was much more stable than our return trip to the city, we were back at the excavation site in no time at all.

"Well then, I'll just go and grab it. Wait here," I said.

Ouzos had some serious skills as a pilot. When he landed, he was even thoughtful enough to position the ship's hatch so it opened near the cabin.

If possible, I would have liked to hire him as my own personal

pilot, but I reminded myself that I already had a dedicated pilot under contract. Ouzos already had a career as a mercenary too.

I shouldn't pressure him.

I'd been in the cabin for less than a minute when I found the memory drive I was looking for.

Good grief... I hate forgetting things. This is all because I failed to check before we left. Work that should have taken less than a minute has now required more than ten times as much labor...

The moment I returned to the ship, a light suddenly shone down on us from above.

"Wh-What's that?!" I shouted.

"Those are ships. I think there are two of them," replied Ouzos.

I wonder if they forgot something here too.

Hold on. Even if they did, I'm the one supervising this excavation site. Why would they come here?

At that moment, a short-distance communication came through on Ouzos's ship.

"Should I put it through?" asked Ouzos.

I nodded, and he pushed a switch. A thin man with a hooked nose on a mean-spirited face appeared on the monitor.

"Doctor Duzbroot..." I said.

"Good evening, Professor Frolina Thezu. Fancy meeting you here."

Harold Duzbroot.

Duzbroot was an imperial viscount and a famous professor at Imperial Capital University. He was also a Doctor of Archaeology. He was both sly and spiteful. And despite being rather timid and incapable of giving a decent lecture, he had as much lust for glory as ten men. The bastard therefore never missed an opportunity to try and one-up me, but he was still a noble.

"Just how might I help you?" I said with barely veiled contempt.

When he strikes up a conversation with me, he almost never has anything worth talking about.

Doctor Duzbroot looked back at me bitterly. "You are young, beautiful, and talented. And your excavation has unearthed a number of artifacts. These have earned you immense credit, and you're starting to become famous in your field," he said, though he clearly didn't relish showering me with praise.

However, in the very next instant, his expression turned to

one of rage.

"But you don't deserve such glory!" he declared. "As I am a viscount and hold a doctorate in archaeology, it is rightfully mine!"

I stared back in disbelief as a doubt I had held for some time resurfaced in my mind.

Does he even really have a doctorate?

"Weren't you the one who insisted that nothing would ever be found here and that the site you're supervising now was certain to hold the greatest discovery of the century?" I asked. "Isn't that why you put pressure on the organizing body to force them to change our assignments?"

The supervisors for each excavation site had initially been determined by lottery. However, as I'd just mentioned, Duzbroot hadn't liked the site I was now in charge of, and he had used his position within the university and his power as a nobleman to force the overseers to change the assignments.

However, having taken a good look inside, Doctor Duzbroot—the noble bastard—found that the excavation site he'd stolen from me wasn't turning up any valuable artifacts. And at the site he'd forced on me, we'd discovered an underground facility housing memory drives and plasti-paper documents from the time when the structure had been first built.

It was common to end up finding nothing when excavating ruins, but even knowing where artifacts *weren't* to be found was valuable information.

Despite that…

"However," Doctor Duzbroot continued, "if I simply report to the academy that you are one of my subordinates and that I was the one who ordered you to search here, I can still claim all of the credit."

Even though I couldn't believe my ears, his expression indicated that he was proud of his suggestion.

"Do you really think I'll allow that?" I said, dropping my feigned courtesy and glaring at him.

He grimaced for a moment. "If you don't allow it, then you might find that your research team ends up taking a little trip out of the city during this storm. They might even meet with disaster."

He then immediately grinned and stroked his chin.

He's taken my crew and my students hostage?!

I immediately tried contacting them, but no one answered.

At that moment, Ouzos turned to me and whispered, “Sounds like a bluff to me. It might just be interference from one of their ships that’s keeping your calls from getting through.”

But I knew what kind of man Duzbroot was.

That bastard noble is definitely capable of that…

“Very well… I’ll do as you ask,” I said. “But first, I want you to ensure the safety of my research team. And the pilot of this ship is not a researcher but a temporary employee. I want you to guarantee his safety as well.”

Seemingly satisfied at having prompted me to take the very attitude he desired, Duzbroot grinned at me again. “Certainly. Now, first of all, stop that ship’s engine. Then, I want you and the pilot to come outside. Bring the ignition key with you,” he ordered us.

NPC No. 75: “Looks like you have a pretty useless pilot. All the pilots I’ve hired have managed to fly through awful storms like this while barely shaking at all, and they were able to land easily as well. I guess incompetent bosses hire incompetent subordinates.”

To be honest, I had no idea what Professor Thezu was thinking. There was no way a guy like that would keep his promise.

Though the professor herself probably thought as much, with her crew and students being held hostage, she must have felt like she had no choice but to comply. At least, that was what I wanted to think.

Also, the fact that he asked me, the pilot, to come out as well means he definitely wants to kill me.

That being said, if I ignore him and run away, I might get sued for breach of contract, so I can’t do that either.

How am I going to get out of this mess?

Our enemy had two ships. I expected one to remain airborne while the other came down to us.

Is he planning to bombard me once they’ve recovered the professor and he’s regained his altitude?

Maybe I can stick close to my ship and immediately jump back inside and toss up my barrier during their ascent. If there’s still a strong wind, then I could even have a chance to escape.

While I was going over my escape plan in my head, I found the professor had prostrated herself before me with a frustrated look on her face.

“Please, Ouzos. That man would think nothing of killing a few people… I know I’m asking a lot of you, but the lives of my crew and my students are on the line. Please help…”

If any outside observer who didn’t already know me saw this scene, I would immediately be deemed a certified, depraved creep who got off on making beautiful academics grovel at his

feet.

Well, I guess I should at least give her credit for actually begging me instead of just yanking out the ignition key herself.

"What's the holdup? Get out there and comply!" shouted Doctor Duzbroot, hurrying us along via the ship's monitor. Due to the camera angle, he must not have been able to see Professor Thezu groveling.

I cut the engine, removed the ignition key and the memory drive from the console, and put both of them in the pockets of my pilot suit. I then handed a spare ignition key to the professor.

"Sorry for this. You have my gratitude," she said.

She took the key without any look of incredulity and slowly stepped outside.

Looks like my decision not to put a bunch of key rings on that paid off. If we can trick the doctor into thinking we've given him the only ignition key and catch him off guard, we might get a chance to escape.

For now, I followed the professor out of my ship.

Outside, there was one ship hovering about fifty meters overhead while the other ship had already landed. There were a number of men outside it who obviously weren't researchers—they were carrying assault rifles. They had to be failed soldiers or mercenaries. And in the center of their group was that bastard Doctor Duzbroot.

"Now then, professor! Come to me holding your research results and that ship's ignition key! And you, pilot, step away from the ship," said Duzbroot.

As he issued that command, the muzzle of every assault rifle turned to point at us.

There's no way I can deal with all of them! I have no choice but to obey.

Plus, now he's forced me to stand far enough away from the ship that I can't jump back in, even if I catch him off guard...

As I stepped back from my ship, Professor Thezu made it to where Doctor Duzbroot was.

"Good. Now hand over the key and your research data."

With a look of reluctance on her face, the professor handed both items over to him.

"Wonderful. Now get in."

After the professor, the doctor, and the ex-soldiers all climbed aboard the doctor's ship, one of the henchmen pointed his

assault rifle through the open hatch. The ship then began its ascent with the hatch still open.

The moment they had risen to half the altitude of the other ship, that other vessel fired a beam that destroyed my ship.

One blast apparently hadn't satisfied them—they then fired a barrage of several more shots.

I knew that would happen.

That was when I ran for my life, only thinking of survival.

I headed for the entrance to a cave that had been dug out near the center of the ruins. There was a stairway leading underground inside.

☆☆☆

Aside: Florina Thezu

"Wonderful. Now get in," that bastard Duzbroot said with satisfaction as soon as I'd handed him the results of my research and the key to Ouzos's ship.

"What are you going to do to him?"

Duzbroot grinned as the key caught his eye. "Once we've ascended to a certain altitude, I'll throw his key back down to him."

Some men who didn't look at all like researchers continued to point their guns at Ouzos as the doctor's cargo ship began its ascent.

Then, once we'd reached an altitude of about twenty-five meters, I heard a beam being fired. The sound was followed by a thunderous explosion.

"You promised he would be safe!" I shouted at Duzbroot.

"That was *my* intention, but it looks like my subordinates had their own ideas. I guess he can have his key back now," said Duzbroot. Smirking, he tossed the ignition key outside.

"You bas— Urgh!"

I was about to thump Duzbroot when one of his fake researcher goons who'd been standing next to me hit me. I was knocked to the ground, and Duzbroot pointed a gun at me.

"If you don't behave, then one of your team members will be the next to die."

"Grr..."

I glared up at Duzbroot as one of his goons restrained me.

"That pilot is still alive! He ran toward the cave!" reported one

of Duzbroot's team members—not one of the goons.

Ouzos had survived.

"Tsk, he's still alive? After him! And once you catch him, kill—Argh!"

Just before Duzbroot finished issuing this order, the ship shook violently.

"Th-The winds suddenly picked up! I can't control the ship, and it's impossible to land it here!"

"Do *something*!" Duzbroot yelled.

"There's nothing I can do! If the wind keeps up like this, we're going to crash!"

Duzbroot's pilot seemed to be struggling a fair bit with his controls, and I could hear the desperation in his voice. Since the cargo hold's hatch had been open the whole time, a few of the goons nearly fell out.

I wish they actually had.

Duzbroot had an idea to stop Ouzos from escaping. "There's nothing else for it! Fire at the entrance to the ruins and block it off! We can come back and kill him later when the weather's cleared up!" cried Duzbroot while clinging to the wall of the ship for dear life.

Of course, they'd never hit their target with only one shot—the wind still buffeted the ship, and the pilot was trying to compensate to avoid crashing to the ground. They fired several shots at the cave.

When I saw that, I couldn't help but snort with laughter.

"Looks like you have a pretty useless pilot. All the pilots I've hired have managed to fly through awful storms like this while barely shaking at all, and they were able to land easily as well. I guess incompetent bosses hire incompetent subordinates," I commented.

Duzbroot reacted by striking me in the temple with the butt of his pistol.

"Insolent woman... Once I've taken all of your research, I'll take *really* good care of you... Just think, a commoner like you will feel the embrace of a nobleman like me. You should be honored."

As I struggled to cope with the pain, I glared up at the grinning bastard.

★★★

Damn, this sucks.

The cave had seemed to only have one entrance, so I'd figured I'd wait inside and deal with any pursuers one at a time. Now, that one entrance had been sealed off.

I had heard the wind start to blow more fiercely just before the entrance had been destroyed, so they couldn't have landed and sent anyone after me anyway. He must've blown it up out of spite.

If I remember what Rossweisse said, there used to be a villa or a military base down here, right? So why's there a cave?

I guess I'll ask her if I ever get back home.

If one of those ancient villas or some kind of hangar is deeper inside this cave, there might be another exit.



I sure wish I had a map, or even a rough sketch of this place…

Well, there's no use waiting around here. Let's try venturing deeper inside.

NPC No. 76: “Freeze, intruder. Move and I shoot.”

I switched on my Wrist-Com’s flashlight and looked around the interior of the cave. It was approximately two and a half meters wide and three meters tall, and the ground sloped down slightly as the path led deeper inside.

Lights and a pipeline for transporting gas had been installed on the cave wall near the ceiling, and another similar pipeline ran along the ground. I supposed those pipes were there to circulate air inside the cave. The one on the ceiling probably supplied oxygen and the one on the ground likely expelled carbon dioxide. Since I had seen a massive power supply unit and an air pump outside, I felt I could be certain that was the case.

Well, they aren’t working right now.

Apart from that, beneath the pipes near the ceiling, a series of plates had been set up on the wall at ten-meter intervals to represent the distance traveled.

The only other distinctive features in this cave were that the walls and floor were surprisingly flat and that broken lights and other vestiges of an ancient civilization could be seen here and there.

And then I made a terrible discovery—there were cracks in the cave’s walls. That damage had probably occurred during the earlier bombardment.

Looks like I’d better hurry up and escape.

Since they had been excavating the cave, I figured that there should still be at least one pickaxe lying around. I decided to venture deeper inside.

About fifty meters from the entrance, the cave’s path split in two directions. The gas pipeline also diverted left and right. The path on the right followed straight on from the entrance while the path on the left veered off at roughly a forty-five-degree angle.

I decided to try going down the right-hand path to start with.

Though the cave’s height and width were the same as they

had been up until this point in the right-hand path, there were short tunnels veering off to the side here and there, indicating that this tunnel was currently being excavated.

Everyone in the professor's team must have been pretty meticulous—they hadn't left any of their tools lying around at all.

I followed the tunnel for nearly thirty minutes. Doing some calculations, I figured that I had traveled 1,800 meters from the entrance. I could also tell that despite the gentle slope, I had descended fairly deep underground. It was starting to become difficult to breathe.

At the 1,850-meter point, the lights and the pipeline ran out. Another twenty meters after that, I came to a dead end—the frontier of the excavation.

I had no choice but to turn around, and as I made my way back, it gradually became easier to breathe again.

Still, I had to do something about my predicament, and soon. There was no telling when the damage from the bombardment might lead to a cave-in.

After a while, I came back to the fork in the road from earlier. This time, I went along the left-hand route.

This path had no tunnels leading off to the sides, and unlike the right-hand path, the walls and the ceiling were again surprisingly flat—much like the tunnel leading directly from the entrance. There were also broken lights here and there.

After advancing about twenty meters, I found myself in a little hollow.

When I looked around, it seemed to be the base for the excavation efforts. Not only were there lights here, but boxes to contain unearthed artifacts, oxygen masks for emergencies, hover-carts for removing dirt, an excavator, large and small batteries, shovels, small pickaxes for digging out the ruins, portable toilets, a table and chairs for when they took breaks, a radio for contacting people outside, and a water cooler, among other things.

Looks like escaping might be easier than I thought.

In fact, I just wish I'd picked this route to begin with.

The lights were battery-powered and still worked fine. I turned them on and looked at the walls—they were cracked here as well.

There was no way the professor and her team would have overlooked those, so I was sure they must have been created by

the earlier attack, like the other cracks in the caves.

After checking the batteries in the excavator and making sure it still worked, I hefted it over my shoulder. I also brought some lights back with me to the entrance so I could start digging my way out.

At first, I thought I'd dig my way out in no time.

But after about two hours with the excavator, the wall of earth before me showed no sign of getting any thinner. The air, however, was getting thinner, so I was starting to worry.

My return trip down the right-hand excavation tunnel had taken one hour, and I'd spent two hours on my own digging efforts. It was now just after 8 p.m., and I was surprised the air inside the cave had lasted this long.

For now, I decided to head back to base camp to take a break and full advantage of the water cooler.

At the base camp, I sat on one of the chairs in the break area. I drank some water and took a deep breath...and realized that it wasn't that difficult to breathe after all.

This cave sloped downward. While the air situation shouldn't have been too bad near the entrance, it was low enough at this point in the cave that it should've been difficult to breathe. Considering the size of the cave, it probably should've been time to think about putting an oxygen mask on too. But in reality, I could still breathe just fine.

Does this mean that there are holes for air to get in somewhere?

The only explanation that came to mind was that at least one of the cracks in the walls was connected to the outside, replenishing the air inside this cave.

Anyway, this meant that I could resume my digging efforts without any reservations.

Come to think of it, the rocks and dirt I dug up are starting to get in the way, I thought, and I decided to remove them with a shovel.

After about a ten-minute break, I got back to digging again.

Thanks to the mysterious supply of oxygen, I didn't struggle to breathe, not even after about twenty minutes of removing dirt.

But after about two more hours of continuous digging, I still hadn't broken through.

"Half past ten already...?"

Since I had arrived here a little before 5 p.m. and the rain and wind were supposed to continue for three days, I still had some time to spare until that bastard Duzbroot and his goons would return.

Guess I'll hit the hay for now. I can line up some of those chairs at base camp to make a bed.

I started to head back to the base camp, but for some reason, I hit a dead end.

"Huh... How?"

I thought there was no way I could have taken a wrong turn, and I hadn't felt any tremors that could have caused a cave-in either.

While I was still wrestling with this complete mystery, a vertical sliver of light appeared on the wall ahead of me. It then slid open without a sound.

My instincts told me this was bad news, so I made to turn on my heel and head back to the excavation site to hide.

I was one step too slow.

As soon as the wall at the dead end silently opened, several laser rounds hit the ground at my feet.

"Freeze, intruder. Move and I shoot," said a voice behind me that sounded like it belonged to a woman.

I did as the voice said.

"Maybe you can tell me what you're doing here?" they asked. "Do exactly as I say. If you can do that, I won't kill you. Throw that shovel you're wielding far away to show me you understand."

I threw the shovel away, just as I was told.

"Now, turn around to face me. Slowly."

When I turned back as directed to look behind me, I saw that the one ordering me about was a very tall woman—about 180 centimeters tall. She had dark, upturned eyes with a sharp gleam in them. She was also holding a gun.

"Give me that thing you're carrying on your waist," she said.

Naturally, I handed over the blaster I was carrying too. I didn't think I could beat her in a fight anyway.

"Now then, back to my question. For what reason did you dare to come in here?"

I told her everything, starting at the very beginning. I explained that this place was currently considered to be an ancient ruin, and excavation efforts were underway. I also told her that the person in charge of that excavation had forgotten

something here and came back to fetch it.

I went on to explain that some men had come to steal the credit for the success of her excavation, and when they had attacked me, I'd fled into the cave; that, partly out of spite, those men had fired on the cave; and that I was now trying to dig through earth and rocks to escape.

"I see. I understand why you're here. Now, I'd like you to get back to digging and leave as swiftly as possible," she said, having seemingly lost all interest in me. She took a step back into the elevator that had appeared earlier to return to where she had come from.

"Um, do you mind if I ask you one question first?" I called out.

"What?"

"Why is it that the professor and her team failed to realize this room was an elevator during their investigation?"

Considering all their excavation equipment, how the heck did *they fail to notice this?*

That was the main reason I stopped her.

She then turned around and nonchalantly gave me the answer. "This facility is disguised by something called Camodust—earth mixed with nanomachines. It inhibits detection by sonar and radar. The trifling tools you people use today could never uncover it."

Though I believed we probably *did* have something like that today, the technical prowess of this ancient civilization appeared to be orders above our own.

There was another reason I stopped her—there was something else I felt I had to check from the first moment I had seen her.

"Then I have one more question. Does the name Rossweisse mean anything to you?" I asked.

"I have a kid sister by that name. Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"I see. I am the light battlecraft Gerhilde, Lot Number 2 of the Wagner Valkyria Sisters."


KID SISTER

I knew it.

Though they bore no resemblance to one another in facial features or stature, I did think they somehow gave off a similar vibe.

NPC No. 77: “Right then, I’m going to abandon this place and go see my sister. You may now investigate the site as much as you like.”

To be honest, I had a lot of other questions I would have liked to ask her.

“What are you doing here?” for starters, along with “Why do you have a human form when Rossweisse didn’t?” I would have also asked, “What caused you to activate here and now?” and “Could you please tell me where the other exits are?” too. But resting my body came first, and since I had the feeling that things would definitely get hairy if I asked her those things, I decided not to.

However, there was just one more thing I *had* to say.

“Excuse me, but do you mind if I rest here inside the elevator?” I asked. “I did come back here to take a break…”

“Once the elevator comes back, do as you like. But don’t go snooping around down there.”

After calmly giving me permission, Gerhilde went back to the floor below. While I was retrieving the shovel and gun she’d forced me to toss away, the empty elevator came back.

I finally had a chance to take off my pilot suit now.

Whenever I flew my ship, I was always sure to wear a pilot suit. Thanks to that habit of mine, only my face had gotten wet in the torrential rain outside, and I didn’t have to worry about catching a cold either.

However, while I had been digging, I had started to sweat, of course. So even if I hadn’t gotten soaked by the rain, I could still catch a cold from being covered in sweat.

Before I took off my suit, I activated its drying function. Doing that evaporated any moisture on the inside or the outside of the suit. It deodorized itself too. It was an amazing feature.

Incidentally, in the interest of mobility and absorbency, I wore a tracksuit under my pilot suit.

Come to think of it, I remember the researchers said they’d discovered plasti-paper documents and memory drives underground

here. Could they be here in the elevator?

When I thought about finding documents inside a room-sized elevator, I felt like I had seen a manga or movie once where an entire office worked in an elevator.

At any rate, after setting my pilot suit down on the table, I did my business in the portable toilet, lined up some chairs to serve as a bed, and lay down. I must have been tired—I immediately lost consciousness.

I didn't feel too good when I woke up the next morning. I guess that a few chairs in a row really didn't make a great bed.

I might've been better off sleeping on the ground.

To start my day, I went to the water cooler and drank until I satisfied my thirst. Then, I checked the excavator's battery, did my business in the portable toilet, and, to be safe, put on my pilot suit. After loading up the antigravity hover-cart with any tools I might need, I left the elevator-slash-researchers' base camp, intent on returning to the entrance.

My eyes then fell on a crack in the walls near the entrance.

Don't tell me this entire space is just an elevator for these ancient ruins. Who'd believe that?

Thinking that, I gently tapped on the cracked part of the wall. Rocks fell from that area, revealing what looked like up and down buttons for an elevator.

The researchers had probably used all kinds of measuring devices while investigating these ruins but had failed to see through such a simple piece of camouflage.

I guess that "Camodust" Gerhilde mentioned is just that incredibly effective.

Something I still wanted to ask Gerhilde came to my mind.

If I'd been a protagonist, I probably would've succumbed to my curiosity. I'd ignore her warning, hit the down button on the elevator, and indulge myself by exploring the ancient ruins.

Instead, I was a self-professed NPC. I ignored that impulse and headed back to my dig site near the entrance.

Incidentally, the reason I hadn't used the gun I'd recovered to shoot my way through the earth was that I didn't think it would help me to bore a hole in it. Moreover, the impact of the blast could affect the cracks in the wall, potentially causing a cave-in and endangering my own life.

In a repeat of the previous day, I spent two hours digging with

the excavator, followed by a ten-minute break, then twenty minutes shifting earth with the shovel. After four sets of that routine, I had finally made a tunnel that led outside. I could escape.

The time was just after 6 p.m. The rain and the wind were still raging outside.

Even at a distance, I could see my ship had been totally destroyed. The cabin that had served as a break room and temporary storage shed for the researchers had also been reduced to rubble, leaving me with no means of calling for help.

And, of course, save for what I'd saved on my Wrist-Com, all my precious books and anime data cards had been reduced to ashes. While their value did not hold a candle to my life, I swore that those men would pay for reducing my precious, precious light novels, manga, and anime to cinders!

However, as things stood, there was no way for me to get back to Ocean Palace.

I have no choice. If I go talk to Gerhilde… No, I can't do that. She told me not to take the elevator down to her floor.

But what's she going to do about the cracks in the cave walls? If she doesn't fix them, the excavation crew will surely find what's behind them before long.

"Hey."

"Whoa!"

While I was out in the rain, weighing my options, Gerhilde suddenly called out from behind me.

"I see you got out. Aren't you going home?" she asked.

"Please don't startle me like that. But you came at the right time. Do you have a ship, a plane, or a boat in there? Just take a look at my ship."

When Gerhilde saw what had become of my ship, she considered my question for a moment. Then, she said something I was all too glad to hear.

"Let me think… I'm pretty sure there's a fishing boat in the corner of the hangar."

"That'll do! Would you be willing to lend it to me?"

If I had a boat, I could make my way back to Ocean Palace. It was certainly a better option than waiting here for Doctor Duzbroot to come back and kill me.

"Sure, I don't mind," she said. "More importantly, you said you knew my kid sister. Where is she?"

“She’s based on Planet Ittsu in the Pooto Sector. She’s a mercenary like me, though she works with a partner.”

“Can you give me a space map? Mine’s a little out of date.”

“All right.”

While I was copying a map in my Wrist-Com to give to her, I noticed that the rain had suddenly stopped falling. However, I could still see it raining a little bit away from me.

I looked up to see a streamlined battlecraft hovering above me. Its silhouette was similar to Rossweisse’s, but it was a little bigger. The ship was painted with black lines and sported a black bow and arrow insignia on a silver background.

It was hovering in place, not trembling even a bit in spite of the raging winds.

I immediately realized that ship was Gerhilde’s true form.

Then, in her humanoid form, Gerhilde said to me, “Right then, I’m going to abandon this place and go see my sister. You may now investigate the site as much as you like.”

With an incredible leap, she climbed aboard herself and flew off in the blink of an eye.

Though it might have been too much to ask, I would have liked to have at least gotten a ride to Ocean Palace. However, not only would we have stood out, but if people knew they were looking at a sentient, ancient superweapon, they might’ve done more than just panic.

Furthermore, even if I had insisted that she was only giving me a ride, the same thing I feared would happen if I ever climbed aboard Rossweisse would surely have occurred.

Plus, the fact that she already had a humanoid form meant that I was bound to get in even more trouble if we became associated with each other. In the end, Gerhilde leaving me behind and me not asking her for a ride had been sensible decisions on both our parts.

Well, I’d better go and look for that boat waiting below ground ASAP. If it’s been damaged, I’ll have to fix it too.

After I took the elevator down below, I found that the lights were still on. In the narrow elevator hall, there was a wall to my left, a corridor to my right, and a leather couch directly in front of me.

I turned and walked down the corridor on my right. There was a very spacious hangar at the end. The stadium at Ocean Palace could have easily fit inside it.

However, not only was there no spaceship here, but there weren't any tools or machinery one might use to maintain one. The exit Gerhilde had presumably used remained open, letting in the wind and rain.

I didn't think Gerhilde would have lied to me, so there had to be a boat somewhere. I took a good look around and eventually found a square hole in the wall with a flight of stairs leading upward. I could see a glass window at the top of the stairs too, so I headed toward them and climbed up.

The stairs seemed to lead up a so-called control tower. It looked like everything in the hangar could be controlled from there.

A moment later, the exit Gerhilde had used started to close.

It must be set to shut automatically, I thought, watching part of the console in front of me light up.

There are all other kinds of fascinating controls here, but I'd better not touch them.

Fortunately, the console appeared to have an outline of the inside of the hangar on it. I couldn't read the writing on it, but I did notice an area that looked like it might be used to store boats.

I immediately went to check out the boats. There, I found three boats and an exit to the sea. One of the boats was also equipped with an engine.

While I couldn't read any of the writing, the controls seemed simple enough that I could pilot the boat. It didn't seem broken, and there was plenty of fuel in the tank.

Looks like I might be able to escape.

However, considering how fatigued I was, I felt like it would be dangerous to go out now. Although the rain would still be fearsome then, it would be better to go out in the daytime in any case.

Just to be safe, I moved the oars from one of the rowboats to the boat with the engine.

After that, I returned to the elevator hall, did my business in the toilet inside the elevator, and went to sleep on the leather couch in the elevator hall.

Unsurprisingly, this was far more comfortable than sleeping on three hard chairs pushed together.

Looks like digging my way out was all a waste of time…

Though there was no way Gerhilde was going to let me know

about this with that attitude of hers.

Well, let's just say this was all part of my new weight loss program.

NPC No. 78: “Sorry to keep you waiting! Is everyone okay?!”

The storm was still raging the next morning.

Well, the professor did say that it would rain for two to three days.

Besides, the harder it’s raining, the better. If I was still here when the storm let up, I bet that bastard Duzbroot would come back to kill me.

Part of me thinks it would be better to try and escape once it’s cleared up, but it would have to be before Duzbroot comes back. A clear sky would make it easy for them to find me.

I’ll set out today, then, while the storm is still raging.

Also, my destination wasn’t Ocean Palace. I’d head for the nearest excavation site instead. It would be bound to have facilities much like those set up here, and while I couldn’t be sure that I would be able to contact anyone, I at least might be able to get back on land.

“Right, let’s get going,” I said to myself as I switched on the boat’s engine.

☆☆☆

Aside: Florina Thezu

Though my arms and legs were bound the whole time, I think it took about two hours for us to reach Ocean Palace.

The wind was strong, so I was sure it was tough to keep the ship steady. It clattered and shook violently more than once during the flight.

This was different from when Ouzos had piloted our ship. Although it had shaken slightly quite a few times, it had never been as violent as it was on this trip.

He really is a good pilot. I’m thinking more and more about hiring him permanently.

However, that all depends on escaping from this bastard Duzbroot…

While I was pondering this, we arrived at Ocean Palace, and I was taken to the area that had been assigned to my team. A

group that must have been Duzbroot's subordinates was in the process of holding my researchers and students up at gunpoint, forcing them into a storage vault.

When everyone had been moved, a short man wearing glasses approached us.

"Looks like you've finished moving *my* research documents," Duzbroot said to him.

"Yes, doctor! With the load that's just been carried off, we've completed moving all of them."

This man, who bowed and scraped to win favor with Duzbroot, was Neimas Bolta. He was an associate professor at Imperial Capital University who was just as obsequious when dealing with the dean—or other teachers and even students of noble birth—but he was domineering when it came to commoners. They roundly despised him in turn.

"That's *our* research! When the dean hears about this, I just *know* you'll be investigated!" I declared.

Duzbroot grasped my chin with one hand. "You'd better not mouth off again. With just one word from me, you know what'll happen to your researchers and your students, don't you? And to you, of course," he said menacingly.

I gritted my teeth in frustration but kept silent.

"That's right. If you behave yourself, then I'll show you a good time later. Shut her in there for the time being."

"Yes, Doctor Duzbroot," said Neimas. With a grin, he took me away and ultimately threw me into the storage vault.

"Professor!"

"Miss!"

I had to be sure my researchers and students were unharmed. "Are you all okay? You aren't hurt, are you?" I asked.

"Everyone here is fine, but they stole all the research data..." Veena Chuls, one of my female students, said ruefully. "Come to think of it, what happened to that pilot?"

"I don't know. Even if he's alive, there's no way for him to get back here. More to the point, where are the police?"

I couldn't believe the police hadn't arrived after acts like these had been committed.

"Actually, there was a serious accident on level one that split up the police force. And then some of the officers seem to be in the doctor's pocket. I told them what happened, but they wouldn't listen to me! And then they stole my Versitool..." said

Veena, bringing her fist down on the floor in frustration. Then, she muttered, “Oh, and David Tryce has gone missing.”

David Tryce was one of my students. He was quite handsome, but since his skirt-chasing was so obvious, he wasn’t very popular with the girls.

“I’m sure he just went to try and pick up some girls… It would be a great help if he could report what happened to the dean or off-world police…but I wouldn’t expect too much from him.”

I couldn’t help but sigh.

☆☆☆

Aside: David Tryce

Crap, crap, crap!

After failing to pick up some chicks, I came back to Professor Thezu’s research center to find Duzbroot’s bootlicker—Neimas Bolta, that shrimp in glasses—working with some thuggish guys to carry off the professor’s research data.

Looks like they’re planning to steal credit for the professor’s work.

Well, better not try to take it back by force. I’m sure it’s valuable to them too, so I’m sure they won’t treat it too roughly.

I need to make sure the professor and my classmates are safe, but even before that, I gotta call the police.

“Hello, Ocean Palace Police Department.”

“Hi. Well, a group of men with guns just came into my university professor’s research area…”

“Sorry, kid. We’ve got our hands full cleaning up that accident on level one,” the officer said. “And we already had a few prank calls from you students. If you keep it up any longer, we might have to arrest you.”

“I see. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

This is really bad—the police are in cahoots with them.

If I’m not careful who I talk to, even the off-world police might not be safe.

I know, I’ll call the dean! But…of course I don’t have the number for his direct phone line, and there might be more of Duzbroot’s goons in the university’s offices.

That settles it: I’ll just have to quietly take out Duzbroot’s goons and get to the professor. That means I’ll need a weapon for starters.

I’m pretty sure there was a spare stun-stick in the security office… And I think there were three guards there—a young guy, a middle-

aged guy, and an old guy.

I hope the old guy's on duty. Wait, the young guy will probably be slacking off, so maybe it'd be best if he was there instead…

Or so I thought as I approached the security office. As luck would have it, there wasn't anyone there. Thanks to their absence, I got my hands not only on a stun-stick, but a tranquilizer gun meant for riot control too.

Lucky.

Now, then, this is where the action begins.

I drew closer to the vault where the professor and the others were being held.

Looks like there are two guards. I'll put one of them to sleep with a tranquilizer dart first…

"Oof…"

While the second guard's attention was on the first guard whom I had tranquilized, I rushed him with the stun-stick.

"Huh? What's wrong? Argh!" he yelled.

Once I'd safely incapacitated both guards, I took the key to the vault and opened the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Is everyone okay?!" I asked.

"Tryce!" they all shouted in surprise.

"Where were you all this time?! What about the guards outside?" Veena asked.

She then put me in a headlock.

"I…I took them out…" I said, struggling a bit. "They're both unconscious right now, outside the door… We should tie them up while we have the chance…"

I gave my classmates and the researchers those instructions while Veena continued to hold me in a headlock. The others nonetheless followed what I'd said, tying up the two thugs outside and stashing them in the vault along with their weapons.

Still, why does Veena always fly off the handle at me? I don't get it.

Suddenly, the professor cried out, "Tryce! Lend me your cell phone."

She was so forceful that I handed it over without thinking.

☆☆☆

Audio-Only Aside: The Dean's Office at the University of Imperial City Glorums

“Dean Campbell! It’s me, Florina Thezu!”

“Oh, Professor Thezu. How goes the excavation?”

“I have something more urgent to discuss. The truth is, Doctor Duzbroot stole my artifacts and research data and tried to murder the pilot I hired! The local police seem to be in cahoots with him and won’t take action!”

“I see… Understood. Leave it to me to contact the police. Gather any evidence you can. I’ll see to it that Doctor Duzbroot—no, *Viscount* Duzbroot—is removed from the faculty.”

“Thank you very much!”

Click.

“Will that do?”

“Yes. Please see to it that he is reported and loses his position.”

“But how can I be sure that you aren’t only here to manipulate me for an occasion just like this one?”

“Please, don’t worry about that. I bear my own grudge against my father.”

“From his youth to now, he’s always made a lot of enemies. And he finally made an enemy of his own son.”

“He has reaped what he sowed.”

★★★

Three hours had passed since I had left Professor Thezu’s excavation site. I had just barely managed to make it to an island that housed the nearest excavation site to that.

Unfortunately, its coastline was nothing but cliffs. I couldn’t make it up to the cabin I saw above me, but I thought I might be able to use their comms link as a relay to call for help.

In a stroke of bad luck, it turned out to be hopeless. Either the distance was too great, or they had some kind of security on it. I just couldn’t get through.

It was times like this that I really appreciated a proper relay station…

Well, even if I couldn’t communicate with anyone, I could still head to Ocean Palace while concealing myself from that bastard Duzbroot. I prayed that none of his goons would spot me on the way back.

After a short break, I departed once more.

NPC No. 79: “I have no problem with that. Professor Thezu was the one to discover it. I’ve already asked everyone involved to promise not to mention my name.”

It took me nearly seventy-two hours and hops to twelve other excavation sites to return to Ocean Palace from Professor Thezu’s site, but I finally made it back.

Since I didn’t know who Doctor Duzbroot’s goons were, I couldn’t ask anyone for help. What a rough journey.

I didn’t have any food, but as far as water was concerned, I was lucky I had taken a fishing boat. The buckets left on board had filled up with rainwater, allowing me to stay hydrated.

Incidentally, there was a dedicated port at Ocean Palace for fishing boats that I could use when I wanted to come ashore. Since it was now morning, I told the men at the port that I’d been fishing for fun the previous night, but a big one had carried my rod away. Once the boat was secured at the port, I hurried to get away from there.

To be honest, I would have liked to buy a change of clothes, head back to my hotel, take a bath, and have a meal for the first time in four days. But I couldn’t help but worry about what had happened to Professor Thezu, and I didn’t know where Doctor Duzbroot’s minions might have been either.

So, instead of doing any of that, I headed to the area listed on the job description as Professor Thezu’s assigned research center. There, I found several people moving storage boxes containing artifacts into a vault.

It looked like Professor Thezu was back in charge again.

I called out to her as she directed the team members carrying boxes. “Sorry for the wait. I’ve just made it back.”

“Ouzos! You’re alive! Thank goodness!”

For a moment, it looked like the professor was about to embrace me.

“I’m pretty dirty at the moment, so you probably shouldn’t…” I said, rejecting her approach in no uncertain terms.

Besides the fact that I was dirty, I was even more worried

about that female student from before—she might just kill me if I were to accept a hug from the professor.

"Not only did I fail to get in touch, but I was unable to do my job for several days. I'm terribly sorry," I said, feeling like I had to apologize for failing to do the job I was given.

Although it'd been unavoidable, I *had* abandoned my job. Some employers would surely complain about a situation like this, and they could even sue me for breach of contract.

"None of what happened was your fault. I was the cause," said the professor.

It seemed like I wouldn't be penalized. That was a relief.

Someone must have reported the incident to the police because right then, they arrived and asked me for identification. Apparently, they'd been searching for me since yesterday. They had looked around Professor Thezu's excavation site and the other sites nearby.

After that, the police said they insisted on hearing what I had to say. In other words, they wanted to subject me to an interview. I replied by asking them if they would first explain to me what happened in my absence in detail.

They agreed without hesitation. After carrying some folding chairs into a vacant vault, I listened to what the police and Professor Thezu had to say.

After we had been separated, Professor Thezu was brought back to Ocean Palace, where she learned that her students and researchers really had been taken hostage. After her research data was all stolen from her, she was imprisoned in one of the vaults.

Moreover, Duzbroot had collaborators among the local police, so she was left with no means of escape or getting help.

At that moment, a student called David Tryce—who simply happened to have wandered off to try and pick up women—succeeded in rescuing the professor, taking out the doctor's thugs, and gathering evidence that led to the arrest of the police collaborators and exposed the doctor's misdeeds.

Thanks to his efforts, that bastard Doctor Duzbroot was arrested. On top of that, he apparently also lost his position at the university.

Naturally, Doctor Duzbroot claimed he was innocent. After his arrest, his many other screwups then started to come to light.

Everyone else who had been victimized by him took this opportunity to press charges against him. Though there were some crimes that were past the statute of limitations, it was apparently still vital that those people submit their grievances.

Well, nothing will change the fact that he had a hand in so many incidents.

The cherry on top came when Duzbroot's own son exposed all of his father's misdeeds. He was apparently the one who had convinced all of the victims to speak up.

When Doctor Duzbroot learned of this, he was of course furious, but his son had no trouble putting him in his place.

Though Ocean Place had its own courthouse, it wasn't currently operational. A police escort was taking Duzbroot back to the Imperial Capital for further questioning.

When it came to my ship, Professor Thezu, the university, and Doctor Duzbroot's son were each going to foot one-third of the replacement costs. And since I also expected to receive some insurance money, things were looking up.

But the problem of where I'd find the same model of ship remained...

Next, it was my turn to share what I'd been up to in my absence.

After explaining all the reasons why I had to stay back at the excavation site at first, I went on to tell them that I had left the site because Doctor Duzbroot and his minions might come back to kill me if I stayed put.

"Here is a conversation they had at that time."

After I showed the police a memory drive containing a video recording of the doctor's communications with his minions at the excavation site, they thanked me and asked to shake my hand.

I decided not to share the fact that I'd met Gerhilde, but I did report having discovered ruins from an ancient civilization in the cave, and that I had returned by using a boat I'd found inside.

I asked the police to promise to credit Professor Thezu with having discovered the ruins and to avoid mentioning my name.

Once our discussion was over, Professor Thezu asked where I'd found the boat and then left at breakneck speed.

The police officers said that they had no further questions for me and I was free to go. After buying a change of clothes at a

store on level two of the floating city, I went to the spa facility to take my first bath in about four days. I followed that up with my first meal in about four days and then returned to my hotel room. As soon as I lay down on my bed, my consciousness began to fade.

The next thing I knew, it was morning. Flustered, I headed straight to Professor Thezu's research center to find not only the professor, but her researchers and students too, crowded around the boat I'd sailed back from the excavation site. They were all busy investigating it with machines and recording their observations.

Though it kind of seemed wrong to disturb researchers while they were in the zone, I simply had to talk to them.

"Good morning..." I said.

Everyone turned to look at me.

"We were waiting for you, Ouzos! Now, let's hurry back to my excavation site!" the professor said.

They all immediately started climbing aboard her cargo ship.

"Y-Yes, professor!"

Their excitement was nearly on par with people ready to go to Comic Bazaar. No—actually, I think they were even *more* excited.

I learned that when they had first come across the rest area I had used as my base camp when I'd been stranded, they had always thought the layout was suspicious. They'd also found it strange that they'd found documents there.

Once they saw the tunnel leading below, they wondered to themselves what was down there and tried digging every which way.

I called the elevator and led Professor Thezu and her team to the basement facility. They were overjoyed.

I didn't want to get in their way, so after telling them where I'd found the boat, I went back aboveground.

By the time I came back to the surface, people there were already starting to remove my destroyed ship and the rubble from the cabin. They were also starting to build a temporary cabin.

Because of the work going on, there weren't many places where I could park the cargo ship for the day. Once I'd recovered everything that'd survived from my ship's wreckage, I decided to head back to base.

While I was sifting through what I'd picked up from what was left of my ship, that girl I'd clashed with before—the elite student with the glasses—spoke to me again since she had been charged with keeping watch aboveground.

"Do you have a moment?" she asked.

"What is it?"

She looked at me with utter distaste. "Since you discovered those ancient ruins, I'll let you off the hook for failing to protect the professor. But just remember, it was the *professor* who found them, not you. Please don't say any more than you have to about this, okay?"

Though her words were polite enough, she threatened me much like someone would if they were holding a knife.

Passing on that hug from the professor may have saved my life.

There was no doubt in my mind that if I hadn't, this girl would've killed me already.

"I have no problem with that," I said. "Professor Thezu was the one to discover it. I've already asked everyone involved to promise not to mention my name."

"I see... That's all right, then."

She seemed a little surprised by my answer but was satisfied. Without saying another word, she went back to monitor the construction of the new cabin.

It would be best not to have anything to do with people like her in the future.

Anyway, I'd better get back and start looking for a new ship.

Incidentally, there was nothing useful left in the wreckage of the Patchwork.

NPC No. 80: “A multipurpose battlecraft with an emphasis on defense? That might be hard to find. We don’t get too many of those these days.”

Upon returning to Ocean Palace, I immediately went to the repair shop. I thought that the mechanics there might’ve had a ship that met my requirements or at least known where to get one.

“A multipurpose battlecraft with an emphasis on defense? That might be hard to find. We don’t get too many of those these days.”

“Yeah, most models emphasize speed and firepower instead.”

The owner of the shop and a younger man I took to be his apprentice racked their brains after hearing my request.

“What did you have before?” asked the owner.

“A Slits model from Eyofs Corporation,” I answered. Although I had made quite a few modifications to it and had replaced many of the parts, my build had been based on a pretty old model of multipurpose battlecraft.

“Ahh… They completely ended production of that model a while ago,” said the owner.

“The company recently got rid of all the remaining engines and replacement parts too, didn’t they?” said the apprentice.

“That’s right… You wouldn’t have anything similar, would you?” I asked.

“I feel like I saw something close in the catalog that came out last month…” said the owner.

“Really?”

I looked at the laptop the owner brought over to show me. There were holographic images of a wide variety of battlecraft, along with their specs.

“I guess I’d have to say…the Noltegrame from Eyofs best meets my requirements.”

“I hear that’s the successor model to the Slits. ’Sides, there are only seven models being marketed for their defense capabilities, including that one,” pointed out the apprentice.

“Even multipurpose craft emphasize speed and firepower these days. The only models that are this tough and heavy are sold exclusively for security applications,” the owner explained.

Inside this catalog, there were anywhere from fifty to over two hundred models for each category of ship. Perfectly balanced models, those prioritizing firepower, faster ships, ships boasting some kind of special gimmick… But wanting the kind of ship that I did—a defensive multipurpose craft—left me with shockingly few options.

To be honest, the fact that there were even several models available put this catalog well ahead of most.

Out of the options, the Noltegrame from Eyofs Corporation stuck out to me. It was the successor to the Slits, the model I’d started with when I’d built my last ship. It was barely any different in appearance, but it had a slightly more spacious interior than the Slits. The Noltegrame’s base specs were also better across the board.

As for the price, the compensation I’d get from losing the Patchwork would probably just cover it.

A significant problem still remained, however.

“You don’t…have any on hand, do you?”

“We might have been able to stock ’em if this city was already officially up and running, but we’re still just a base for scientific investigations. If you went to Hain, the imperial capital, or one of the designated planets, they might have one. Your only other option is to order one straight from the manufacturer.”

That eased my fears. After all, Ittsu—where I was based—was a designated planet under the empire.

After thanking the owner and his apprentice, I left the repair shop. Once I was some distance away, I realized that I still hadn’t reported my current circumstances and what’d happened during the mission to the guild. I quickly called Old Man Lohnes.

“Hello?”

“Ah, hello. It’s Ouzos.”

“Hey. What’s up?” he asked. “Did you mess up somehow?”

“Well, actually…”

I told him everything that had happened up until that point.

“I see… What a disaster. But from what you’ve told me, it sounds like the client won’t try to hold you responsible, so you should be fine. After all, you really aren’t at fault. Take the payout

and come home."

I felt extremely glad and reassured to hear Lohnes say that, but at the same time, I started imagining unpleasant scenarios.

"I just hope another Pinky type doesn't turn up to make unreasonable demands…" I grumbled.

"Have you run into anyone else like that?"

"There *was* someone here who seemed capable of it…" The face of the female college student who'd secured my silence about the ruins crossed my mind.

"Well… You know how it is. The job'll be over soon, so just finish up and get out of there as soon as possible. Oh wait, this is work too. Right then, take care," said Old Man Lohnes before hanging up the phone.

Well, if worse comes to worst, I guess I can always talk to the professor…

That evening, after I'd headed back to the excavation site to pick up the professor and her team and bring them back, another day's work came to an end.

Incidentally, when the incident had occurred, there had only been seven days left in my contract. For four of those days, I had been stranded and struggling to survive on my own. On the day I'd returned to Ocean Palace, I'd gone straight to my quarters and slept like a log.

Two days had passed since I'd resumed my work, including today. In other words, my contract was set to end tomorrow.

I had thought about telling the professor that I didn't mind extending the contract, at least to make up for the four days when I hadn't been working, but since her personal pilot had already come back, I was certain she'd refuse.

Incidentally, the professor's dedicated pilot was handsome. He was also said to have been one of the professor's classmates back in her school days. And not only did that female student not snap at the pilot, but her eyes sparkled when she looked at him.

Though the pilot himself wasn't at fault, I hoped he would understand if I quietly resented him for that.

The next day came. At the end of my last work shift, and after receiving some final words of apology and commendation from Professor Thezu for getting me caught up in the incident, I received my compensation from the professor, the university, and the doctor's son. Thankfully, it ended up being quite a tidy sum—9 million credits. I took it in data money.

Incidentally, I was still scheduled to receive my payment for the job itself, along with my insurance payout, back at the guild.

But while I would have liked to leave the planet at once, there weren't any direct flights to Planet Ittsu from there. Instead, I would have to make a number of transfers to get back there. There weren't any more flights that day, though, so I would be departing the following morning.

Since this had been my last day of work, I was invited to have drinks with the team, but of course, I excused myself. Part of it was that I wouldn't be able to take part in their conversations, but the main reason I refused was because I was scared of that female student. But I was glad that at the very least, she didn't phone me at the hotel—or barge straight into my room—demanding that I return the money I'd received in compensation. That'd been a serious worry of mine.

The following morning, after seeing the professor and her team off as they went to the work site for the day, I took the space elevator up to the port in orbit. I arrived at Planet Ittsu the following afternoon after an uneventful journey.

Once I made it back to base, the first thing I did was buy some food. Since I'd known I'd be gone for a whole month, I'd emptied out my refrigerator before I'd left. I really had nothing to eat at home.

Once I was done grocery shopping, I went back to my apartment, did some cleaning, took a bath, and then watched some anime while I ate.

Since I'd relaxed that evening, I made my way to the Mercenaries Guild the very next day. The guild was as frenetic as ever, but it didn't seem to me like any particular excitement had happened in my absence. It looked like Gerhilde hadn't made an appearance here, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

I then headed to Old Man Lohnes's desk, like always.

"Hey. Sounds like you had a rough time," he said cheerfully.

"You know you were the one who suggested this job to me, right?"

"Hey, don't blame me. Think I could have predicted something like that would happen?"

"Well, I guess not..."

Though I'd started to criticize him, I wasn't really serious about doing so. Unforeseen circumstances could arise in any job, and it was ultimately the responsibility of the contractor—me—

to deal with them.

Old Man Lohnes knew this very well too, so he paid my outburst no more mind and carried on talking about the job.

“Right, first of all, here’s your official payment for the job, and here’s compensation for your damages.”

“That’s quite a tidy sum,” I commented.

My official payment was 500,000 credits for one month’s work. With compensation for my damages added to that, my total payment was 1.2 million credits. Oddly enough, this was almost exactly the same sum I’d received for the job that had motivated me to take this one in the first place.

I reflexively took a look at my surroundings, but, of course, Pinky was nowhere to be seen. Relieved, I accepted my payment and insurance money in the form of data money.

This took care of my financial issues, but it still left me with one outstanding problem.

“The thing is, I still don’t know where to get a replacement ship,” I said. “I did see a model I liked in a catalog, but I don’t know whether the dealerships here carry it…”

Although Ittsu was one of the designated planets in the empire, there was no guarantee the manufacturer would have decided to ship their less popular products here.

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to hope to get lucky… Why not take some time off and take your time looking for one?” Lohnes suggested. He apparently couldn’t help but feel sorry for me after what had happened.

I knew that if I took too much time off, I would only start getting lazy. I resolved to only take enough of a vacation to replace the books and anime I’d lost in the shipwreck.

But if there’s a doujinshi exhibition happening soon, I might take a longer break…

Special Chapter 1: My Rookie Days

In a workshop on the grounds of my parents' estate—also known as the Tielsad Corporation estate—I absentmindedly watched from the window of a second-floor office as my battlecraft, the Egalim, received an overhaul.

I'd started working as a mercenary nearly four years ago, and this was far from my ship's first overhaul.

Part of the process caught my eye—they were repainting the female leopard emblem that had given me my alias.

As I watched, I recalled the events that had led me to adopt the leopard as my emblem in the first place.

From a very young age, those around me never saw me as anything more than a branded product. They regarded me as either the daughter of Viscount Tielsad or the heiress to the Tielsad Corporation, a spacecraft manufacturer.

Of course, I adored my father—who was an imperial viscount as well as the manager of that corporation—and I respected him too. But even so, I couldn't accept the fact that everyone just saw me as part of his brand. Sometimes, it made me angry.

At times like those, I could remember watching a duo of female protagonists in a movie or something. They were mercenaries and went on adventures. When I saw how the other characters judged them solely based on their own accomplishments, my childish mind found that profoundly moving.

They inspired me to start training my body, learning how to defend myself, learning how to pilot a spaceship, and so on. Around the time I graduated from middle school, I won a junior championship in martial arts. I was even a competent enough pilot to win a competition where I had to fly a battlecraft in a simulator.

Despite these achievements, those around me still saw me as nothing more than the daughter of Viscount Tielsad, the president of a company that built spacecraft.

But in the end, right before I was about to start high school, I was able to convince my parents to let me start working as a

mercenary. That was when I joined the guild branch on Planet Ittsu, which was near my family's home on Planet Ifcorzes.

I made that move because there was a chance people would find out about my new career if I were to start working on my home planet. And besides that, I was sure that the world of mercenaries had to be a meritocracy. If I were to join the guild on a new planet, people would surely stop associating me with my family's brand.

Of course, I joined, knowing full well that it was a life-and-death profession. But I felt that if I didn't take that risk, no one would ever judge me for my own accomplishments.

Still, even though I'd already signed up to be a mercenary, I still planned on attending high school. When I wanted to go on more time-consuming missions, I would wait until I was on vacation. I resolved to do shorter missions after school or on weekends.

However, in order to seek work as a mercenary, I was going to need a battlecraft.

To fulfill that requirement, I originally intended to purchase a secondhand craft with some money I'd saved myself. However, my father introduced two conditions before he agreed to let me become a mercenary.

"You will use one of my company's ships, and Shelley will accompany you in a mother ship," he said.

Therefore, I had no choice but to use the ship he provided.

At first, I resisted his suggestion. I'd complained for years about being part of the family brand, so I wasn't comfortable using one of the family business's products. But I had to swallow my pride on that count to become a mercenary.

Though...I actually was really pleased to hear that Shelley would be coming with me.

And so I became the owner of two ships so I could start work as a mercenary: an Si-09 light battlecraft—the Egalim—and a medium-class container ship—the Uklimo. Both were made by the Tielsad Corporation.

Looking back on it now, I can hardly believe that my mother and father agreed to such a silly demand from their child. I have nothing but words of thanks for them. They believed in and encouraged me.

Anyway, my first step into the world of mercenaries was a fairly peaceful one.

After getting top marks on the entrance exam for Egibilis Academy High School on Planet Ifcorzes, I went to the Mercenaries Guild to register after my first week of school was done. That same Friday, I selected a low-risk pirate hunt from the bulletin board and took my application to reception.

“Sorry, but I don’t have time to entertain kids. Could you buzz off?” the woman said as I approached the reception desk, even though she obviously wasn’t busy.

When she addressed me in this way, something in me snapped.

“Oh, I can see you’re busy,” I said. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get in the way of an old hag smearing some kind of resin on her face.”

Looking back on that moment now, I’m embarrassed by how impertinent a rookie I was.

The receptionist began to scream at me, but I ignored her. I approached a male reception clerk seated a short distance away instead.

He assisted me without missing a beat. “I apologize for my colleague’s attitude. I’ll be sure to speak to her later. Now then, are you certain this is the mission you wish to take on?”

“Yes, sir! Thank you for helping me!”

My first ever target was an all-female pirate band known as the Tuxedo Cat Sisters. They were said to pilot ships with stylized bicolor cat insignias on the outsides.

When my classes finished on the day of my departure, I headed straight to my mother ship, which I’d asked Shelley to disguise as a normal cargo ship. I climbed aboard and set a course to patrol the sector where the sisters were most likely to show up. Of course, since our craft was disguised as a regular cargo ship, I looked up the most popular shipping routes in that area and followed one of them.



On the first day of our patrol, we found nothing.

The next day, we refueled at the guild and patrolled the perimeter again.

Early that same afternoon, our targets finally took the bait.

They had one craft that resembled a cargo ship and two battlecraft. All three of them bore a bicolor cat insignia.

Upon our approach, we received a communication from the pirates. To hide the fact that we were preparing to attack them, I answered the call with my camera zoomed in and focused on my face.

Two women wearing tuxedo cat masks—complete with cat ears—appeared on my monitor to demand my surrender.

“You in the cargo ship, stop right there!”

“If you don’t stop, we’ll shoot you down!”

In terms of age, they both looked just a little older than I was. They wore tight pilot suits adorned with patterns that matched their cat masks.

“Are you two with the pirate band known as the Tuxedo Cat Sisters?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Scared? Then stop your ship right now.”

“You can’t escape from us!”

Since they called themselves the Tuxedo Cats, I’d thought they might’ve spoken like cats, perhaps ending their sentences with “meow,” but they didn’t.

Anyway, I’m glad that they seem to be underestimating me.

“Okay. I’ll stop, all right.”

After bringing the Uklimo to a full stop, I opened the cargo hatch. Then, I suddenly turned my engines to full throttle and charged at the sisters in a straight line, destroying all the nozzles on their thrusters.

My ploy to get the sisters to think I was surrendering and make them cut their own engines had paid off.

“How dare you trick us?! You’ll pay!”

“Sealing off your means of escape is just common sense,” I told them.

One of the cats had the gall to complain, but I felt they’d probably known what they were signing up for when they became pirates.

“Maysho! Are you okay?!”

“Yes, Milke, I’m fine! Sis, don’t worry, I’ll fix those nozzles in no time!”

It sounded like another one of the sisters was piloting the cargo ship, meaning that there were three sisters in all.

"Now you've gone and done it!"

"I swear I'll shoot you down!"

Of course, the other two sisters came to fight me.

Not only had I experienced many one-versus-two fights in simulations, but I had even prevailed in fights against three or four opponents. Unfortunately for them, the three Tuxedo Cat Sisters were no match for me.

I had the sisters detained aboard the Uklimo and was waiting for the police to arrive.

One of the three sisters suddenly lashed out at me, but since her hands were bound together, I had no trouble fighting her off.

"Damn! How could *I* lose so easily?"

The one who had lashed out was apparently the second oldest of the sisters. She pounded her fists on the floor in frustration.

"I'm very fond of animals, you see. I'm particularly good at handling naughty kittens."

Admittedly, this was not a great taunt, but the three sisters still glared resentfully at me.

The second-oldest sister, the same one whom I had just taken down, asked, "What's your name?"

"It's Fialka Tielsad," I answered.

"No! I mean your alias. Your nickname!" she said.

"I've only just made my debut, so I don't have one yet," I answered.

"Well then, you'd better become famous enough to get one!" she said. "That way, one day we can boast, 'We were once caught by the famous mercenary so-and-so!'"

"Like I care."

At any rate, once the three sisters were safely in police custody, a specialist who'd been picked by the guild took care of selling off their ships for me. But when I returned to the guild to collect the payment for completing my mission, the male reception clerk was nowhere to be seen.

I felt I had no choice but to approach a different receptionist. I went to a woman nearby who had green hair that she wore in a side ponytail. Unlike the lady with caked-on makeup I'd spoken to on my first visit here, she assisted me without missing a beat.

“Congratulations on your first successful mission. The reseller has already transferred the proceeds from the ships you captured, so we’ll pay you that along with your reward. Would you prefer cash or data money?” she asked.

“Data money, please.”

The reward for capturing the Tuxedo Cat Sisters was 900,000 credits. Along with their two battlecraft at two million apiece and the cargo ship at 2.5 million, my total payment came to 5.4 million credits.

I was keenly aware that this was quite a hefty sum for my first-ever job.

For dinner that evening, my mother went all out for the first time in a while. She prepared a sumptuous banquet.

I was happily filling my belly, but Shelley pointed out that I hadn’t even touched my homework. I panicked and went to make a start on it. I could have worked on it while I’d been waiting to lure out the Tuxedo Cat Sisters, but I suppose I had been so tense and excited that I’d forgotten. That being said, my homework was pretty simple that weekend, so I finished it in about an hour.

Later, while taking a bath, I recalled something one of the Tuxedo Cat Sisters had said to me.

She’s right, mercenaries do *aspire to have their own alias or nickname…*

Though any mercenary could obtain permission to use an alias after making it to Bishop rank, it was supposed to be something that other people decided to call you naturally. Giving yourself an overblown alias in spite of a lack of prowess was mortifying.

On the other hand, I didn’t want a lousy alias. The safest bet was to emblazon your battlecraft with an emblem you really liked. If you did that, you could, to a certain extent, induce people to pick your preferred nickname.

In that case, what would I like mine to be?

I deliberated for too long and ended up getting seriously lightheaded from spending too long in the bath. Mother and Shelley thoroughly scolded me as a result. It was so embarrassing.

On Monday morning, the next school week began. I took my

seat in class 1-D at Egibilis Academy High School and continued to agonize over what emblem I wanted to have painted on my battlecraft.

“Morning. Looks like you have something on your mind. Did something happen?”

The one who had asked me this was Myca Fienidas, the count’s daughter who had once tried to steal Shelley from me.

“Hey. Can you think of an animal that’s not just cute, but cool as well?” I asked her. That was what I’d been pondering when I’d been in the bath for so long that I had ended up getting dizzy.

I wanted to emblazon my ship with some kind of animal. If I did that, then once I was recognized for my achievements as a mercenary, I was bound to receive a nickname that referenced it. Once I had thought of that, I’d started agonizing over what animal to choose.

“What about an animal from the cat family? Like a leopard or a cheetah.”

“Good point… Something like that would be cute *and* cool.”

“Though you’re much more like a tiger!” she trilled.

“Who are you calling a tiger?!”

Though we had been on pretty hostile terms back when she’d tried to steal Shelley, we spent quite a lot of time together these days. We were close enough now that we could handle this kind of bickering.

“If you’re that interested in animals, why not go to the zoo and see the real thing?” she suggested.

That made a lot of sense. I decided I’d go to Planet Ifcorzes’s Hotol Zoo after school that day.

“I heard some baby animals were born at the zoo the other day! Bears, elephants, and leopards!”

After school that day, I called Shelley and asked her to bring the air-car. I couldn’t help but smile as I recalled what I’d heard about the animals at the zoo during break time at school. I was ready to head to the zoo, still wearing my school uniform.

For some reason, the count’s daughter, Myca Fienidas, climbed into the air-car next to me.

“Wait a minute, Myca! What are you doing in *my* air-car?!”

“I felt like going and having a look too. I want to see some baby bears, elephants, and leopards!”

Knowing full well that this girl wouldn’t easily back down once

she'd stated her intent, I had no choice but to bring her along. Moreover, her family was more highly ranked than mine. If she claimed that I'd tried to kidnap her or something, I'd be at a distinct disadvantage.

"It's been quite some time, Lady Myca."

"Long time no see, Shelley. Was it this past summer that we last met?"

"Yes, miss. I believe that it was," Shelley replied.

"If you ever get sick of this girl, come work for me instead. We'll welcome you with open arms."

"I appreciate the sentiment."

By the way, Myca still hadn't given up entirely on Shelley. She tried to win her over each time they met. Though of course, this was still better than when we were kids, like that time when she tried to use her family's position to take her from me.

When we arrived at the zoo, there were still quite a lot of visitors who had come to see the baby bears, elephants, and leopards even though it was a weekday evening.

Naturally, we hopped aboard one of the zoo's transport platforms and headed straight for each of the animals' enclosures.

Now, as for the baby animals... The bear cubs were still the size of teddy bears. The baby elephants, having only just been born, still followed their mother around closely. As for the leopard cubs, they looked just like house cats and were totally adorable. I even won a lottery for the chance to hold one.

We looked at a lot of other animals as well. I was particularly pleased to have had the chance to pet a shoebill that was in the petting enclosure for some reason.

After that, we headed to the gift shop and purchased a few plushies and hologram cards.

When we were on the way home in the air-car, I finally made up my mind.

"I've decided. I'm going with this as my emblem," I said as I cuddled the leopard cub plushie I'd bought at the gift shop. I was going to put one of them on my ship.

Though I'd agonized over the decision, I felt that picking something that felt right in the moment was the way to go.

"Now that you mention it, you *were* thinking about your ship's emblem this morning, huh?" asked Myca as I cuddled the

leopard plushie.



“That’s right. If you’re going to have a symbol, isn’t it best to have something cute and cool?”

“Well, I guess *you* would,” said Myca, sighing in exasperation.

As a matter of fact, Myca had helped me convince my parents to let me become a mercenary in the first place.

“I see. In that case, why not wear this too?” Shelley took a leopard-ear headband out of a shopping bag and placed it on my head.

Wait, weren’t they selling these at the gift shop?

“Hang on! When did you buy this?” I asked.

“I thought it would suit you, so I simply had to purchase one. Now you look like mother and child.”

“How cute. Now you really *are* a leopard,” Myca said with a snicker as she pointed her Versitool at me.

“I have some bear ears for you, Lady Myca,” said Shelley, and she placed a headband with bear ears on Myca’s head.

“You’re pretty cute too, bear lady,” I rejoined as I pointed my own Versitool at Myca.

I still remember how much fun we had in the car as we headed home that evening.

Looking back on that day, I couldn’t help but feel that Shelley had started to tease me more since then. Of course, it wasn’t like I really minded most of the time. If I ever did, I would tell her off in no uncertain terms.

While I was reminiscing, a female worker from the workshop came into the office and informed me that my ship was ready.

“My lady. The overhaul is complete.”

“Thanks. Were any changes made?” I asked.

“None, apart from replacing some worn-down parts.”

“Well then, once you’ve refueled it and replenished its ammo, please return it to the Uklimo.”

“Yes, miss.”

As the worker left, Shelley entered the office.

“They have really mellowed over the years, haven’t they?” she asked.

“Sure have.”

In fact, the worker who had just left the office was none other than Maysho, the youngest of the three Tuxedo Cat Sisters pirates whom I had caught on my very first mission.

Because the three Tuxedo Cat Sisters had only caused a paltry

amount in damages and hadn't killed anyone—as well as the reason they had given for becoming pirates—they had been granted a certain degree of leniency. They'd been sentenced to three years' hard labor.

By the way, they had become pirates in the first place to pay back the debt that had been left by their parents, who had both died in an accident.

The three women had already learned to pilot and maintain battlecraft, albeit half-heartedly. They'd also inherited a cargo ship their parents used for deliveries along with battlecraft to defend it. Because of that, they'd decided to become pirates rather than end up in some seedy hospitality jobs.

Around the time they had completed their sentences, my father happened to be engaged in some activities with hopes to rehabilitate ex-convicts. As a result, all three of them had been hired by the Tielsad Corporation.

At present, the youngest sister, Maysho, worked as a mechanic, and the second-oldest sister, Cial, was also on the maintenance crew. As for the oldest sister, Milke, she had an accounting job.

When the sisters had seen the emblem on my battlecraft, they'd said, "Did you rip off our emblem?"

That had definitely ticked me off a little bit.

By the way, the leopard cub I had seen back then had her name decided by a popular vote. Her name was Clare, and she had given birth to her own cubs one year ago.

Special Chapter 2: Aspirations

In Planet Racing, all kinds of sponsors would contribute funding to teams and to the sport as a whole in a variety of different ways.

One way in which they saw a return on their investments was when the industry as a whole, or the members of individual teams, appeared in commercials or on posters as corporate mascots, advertising their products.

I had been cast in such roles a number of times in the past, but on this occasion, a brand called Silfeed Gospel—a company that sold all kinds of beauty products, including cosmetics, skincare, and hair care items—had aggregated all of their technologies to start a new project to help women achieve their beauty goals. It included building outlets for aestheticians, boutiques, and sports gyms. To coincide with this expansion, they sought to cast about twenty female Planet Racing athletes to serve as spokeswomen for their commercials and posters. Aero and I were among them.

The photo shoots were all supposed to be wrapped up in just one day. Claiming that they wanted to get some shots of us in our regular working environments, they'd organized an exhibition race on the closest planet to the capital, which was Planet Kewattraid at only 8,546 kilometers away. Each of the racing teams they'd assembled had its own camera crew.

The planet serving as the course for this mock race, Planet Kewattraid, had a surface made up of hard rock. There were no oceans, and instead, it had vast plains of iron oxide. With a radius of about twenty thousand kilometers, it was a small planet compared to some others, but there were stark differences between its flat areas and those with more dramatic topography. These were pretty basic features when it came to choosing a Planet Racing course, so Planet Kewattraid was the planet all beginners would race on first.

But since the atmosphere was mainly made up of methane, it was regrettably not suited for human habitation.

Presently, we were all headed to a changing room inside a platform floating ten thousand kilometers above the surface of

Planet Kewattraid.

“This is so exciting!”

“What is?” I asked.

Aero stood in front of me with her eyes sparkling. “Don’t you know, Scuna? Silfeed Gospel is a super-duper famous cosmetics brand! They have a wide range of makeup, from luxury items to more affordable ones, along with skin, hair, and nail care products. On top of that, they’re even involved in medical research to develop medications and supplements too. They basically offer any kind of beauty product a woman could want! I’ve never felt luckier to be sponsored!”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Now, let’s hurry up, change, and get to the garage.”

“Okay…”

After we’d arrived at the changing room and I was changing into my pilot suit, Aero and I realized the air felt charged somehow. It was just like the feeling in the air before a real race.

We quickly finished getting ready and headed to our team’s pit.

“Everyone’s raring to go, even though this is just an exhibition race where combat is forbidden…” I mused.

“They probably think we’re the weird ones for acting so relaxed,” said Aero.

At the gathering before the shoot, we had listened to someone from Silfeed Gospel’s PR department speak, and everyone besides Aero and me had been tense.

I guess no one wants to lose, not even in a mock race.

By the way, in order to take photos of us while we were chatting away, the crew had employed a circular, floating camera droid that was about ten centimeters in diameter. They were using that supposedly out of concern for the racers. Having strangers enter the garage would only get in the way, and they might make some racers nervous.

“Does this mean the camera crew are watching us from somewhere else?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, then…” Aero grabbed the camera droid. “Maybe this is the kind of shot they’re hoping for?”

She then pressed the droid against my chest.

“Whoa! Hang on, what do you think you’re doing?!”

Without thinking, I grabbed Aero’s arm and the camera droid

and tore it from her grasp. I hurled the camera droid back in her direction, but she managed to dodge it.

"Hey, you two. We're about to start the race, so get ready to—Eek!"

Unfortunately, it just so happened to hit a young female manager in the chest instead.

Naturally, she got angry at us. Then, she picked up the droid, which had been rendered inoperable by the impact, and took it back to the camera crew to apologize. There, they discovered that the droid had just turned itself off as a safety feature.

In fact, the crew was actually grateful. One of them said, "Thanks for that lovely shot."

That incident seemed to rid us of any lingering tension. In fact, the exhibition race ended with me coming in first and Aero coming in second in a one-two finish.

As soon as the exhibition race was over, we returned to the imperial homeworld of Hain, where Silfeed Gospel's headquarters were located.

After arriving there, we were served lunch in a general-purpose hall inside the company's headquarters.

"Today's gathering is also an opportunity for you to sample some new diet and low-calorie food items we've developed to coincide with the opening of our new gyms. As you are all motorsports athletes, I expect you already eat diet or low-calorie foods. If you would be willing to include some of our company's products in your pantries, we would be very grateful. We have everything set up as a buffet, so please have as much as you like. And if you have any comments, please don't hesitate to speak your mind."

Once the PR representative was done speaking, we each helped ourselves to whatever appealed to us the most and sat down wherever we wanted to eat.

"Most diet food doesn't taste that great, but this is delicious!" I cried. I had selected a white stew with tons of vegetables, along with dinner rolls, grilled sausages, and a green salad.

"I can't believe they came up with a diet meatloaf!" sang Aero. Alongside her large helping of meatloaf with demi-glace sauce, Aero had an egg sandwich and corn potage on her tray.

Since this was lunch, there were no alcoholic beverages on offer.

“My, my. Looks like the commoners are enjoying themselves.”

The person who felt she needed to ridicule us for enjoying our meal was the ace of Team Violet Dragon. Her name was Priselisel Arilaus Farina, and she was the daughter of a count.

While smiling politely, I greeted her with just a hint of a barbed retort. “Hello, Farina. You certainly got heated during the race earlier, didn’t you?”

“Well, it was only an exhibition race. I wouldn’t let you win in a real competition. Ah, mind if I join you?”

For some reason, Farina decided to sit right next to me.

“You’re certainly full of it, just like always. Aren’t you, young lady without any ringlets?!” said Aero.

“There’s no law stating I need to wear my hair in ringlets just because I’m a young lady!”

“Huh… But that’s how I always picture girls like you!”

When Aero started to pester Farina, she lost her temper and snapped right back.

The two of them often ended up bickering like that. Perhaps it was because they were incompatible, but strangely enough, sometimes it seemed like they were actually good friends.

“But I guess it can’t be helped. Neither vertical nor horizontal curls suit you, Prissy…”

“Lirin! Whose side are you on?!” complained Farina. “And what are horizontal curls?!”

Peeking out from behind Farina was Lirin Fletline, another member of her team. She had made a name for herself as a solid racer, which belied her frank, cheerful personality.

“Now, now. Don’t let it bother you. Let’s just enjoy our meal,” said Fletline as she sat with us and started eating.

“As I usually leave my menu to the top chefs and dieticians, it’s a bit of fun to eat like this once in a while,” said Farina. “But I must say, it’s impressive how deep Silfeed Gospel’s knowledge is—not just in cosmetics and skincare, but in fields like nutrition as well.” She was eating some omurice along with fried shrimp and potato salad.

As for Fletline, her plate was piled high with chocolate cake, pudding, fruit jelly, cookies, a pear tart, and yogurt mousse. She even had a serving of ice cream and some cola—she had really gone all out on dessert.

Fletline clearly thought she’d amassed a delicious meal, but Aero, Farina, and I recoiled a little when we saw what was in

front of her.

Once lunch was over, our next shoot would take place in the spacious direct sales market on the first and second floors of the company's headquarters. As we walked around looking at different stalls offering cosmetics, skincare, and hair care products, a number of camera droids photographed us.

Rooms on the third, fourth, and fifth floors above us had previously been offices, but now they had been renovated to serve as film studios, boutiques, aestheticians, hair salons, and nail salons. There was even a gym.

Everything between the sixth floor and the top floor—the thirtieth floor—was still office space. There was a new warehouse and parking lot below ground level as well.

Aero looked around at all the stalls and was getting excited again. "We have exclusive access to the market at their headquarters today! Isn't this great?"

"Well, they aren't getting any customers today besides twenty racers like us," I pointed out.

"I think we must be the first people to have exclusive access to this since Her Imperial Majesty visited."

"It's not like you arranged this yourself, though, Prissy."

For some reason, Farina and Fletline were with us.

"I come here all the time, but I'm guessing this is *your* first time here?" asked Farina, attempting to show off.

But the truth was, with our income? Any Planet Racer could afford the products being sold here. And with the money I'd won in races, it was even more affordable.

That being said, there was no limit to how crazy expensive things could get. I'd be unsurprised if I found something with a price tag that made me flinch.

Just as I was thinking that, I spotted some small vials of beauty serum sitting in a showcase. Each one of them probably only held about thirty milliliters of liquid. To my amazement, they were 350,000 credits each.

I wondered to myself how many meals I could have eaten as a student at Stardust Burger with that kind of money. How you reacted to a price tag like that, regardless of how well-off someone might be now, really revealed differences in people's upbringing.

"Still, can they really make a commercial of us walking around

and looking at stuff?”

Perplexed by how little our situation resembled a TV commercial, Aero started prodding the camera droids that floated around us.

“Of course we can. By filming you walking around and shopping naturally, we can show that to other customers and increase their desire to shop with us.”

The one who said this was a woman who looked no older than us. She was wearing a smart brand-name suit, and her long, emerald-green hair was done in a single braid.

“It’s so lovely to meet you. I am Eliana Arnoid, the director of Silfeed Gospel.”

Naturally, her greeting startled not only the four of us but everyone else around too. We’d assumed she was just a PR rep—not the president of the company.

While we were all frozen, the first to recover was Farina.

“Thank you for your courtesy. I am Priselisel Arilaus Farina. I had no idea that someone so young was in charge of Silfeed Gospel.”

It wasn’t out of the question for someone as young as her to be at the top of a major company like this…

When the previous director retired, their daughter must have taken over.

Or so I thought.

“Not at all. I may look young, but I have a son around your age,” said Ms. Arnoid.

Everyone was shocked. “Huh?!”

She had just dropped an unbelievable bombshell.

She looks around the same age as us…but she has an adult son?

Hearing our amazed cries, not only did the other racers turn to look at Ms. Arnoid, but so did the team managers, assistants, and camera crew.

The president of Silfeed Gospel was the only person who was maintaining their composure.

“I beg your pardon, but…did you perhaps sustain an injury so severe that you needed a full-body prosthetic?” asked Fletline. This was a question everyone else had wanted to ask. If Ms. Arnoid were using a full-body prosthetic, it would completely explain her appearance.

The president chuckled to herself. “No, this is the body I was born with. It’s all thanks to my company’s skincare products.”

Not only was this not the answer we expected, it wasn't really something we wanted to hear either. After she said that, every woman besides the president, her employees, and the four of us seemed to forget they were being filmed and flocked to the skin-care section.

"Ms. President, why hire us when you could just appear in a commercial yourself…?" asked Fletline.

The other three of us nodded in unison before going to stock up on skincare products as well.

I still wasn't quite ready to buy that 350,000-credit serum though…

After that, we were offered trial sessions with the aesthetician, so we headed to the floor where the salon was. The moment we were done with that, we'd be changing outfits for a poster photo shoot.

This was my first time seeing an aesthetician, so I was really nervous. After all, it was seriously embarrassing to walk around in nothing but a bathrobe—under it, I was completely nude.

"Relax. We're all women here, and there aren't any camera droids," Aero said. She was relaxed and clearly used to this.

I couldn't help but feel embarrassed. "It's not the same as a massage from the team doctor, Weblass, though."

"The old doc does give a good massage, but don't even mention them in the same breath!"

We chatted, and it soon became our turn with the aesthetician.

After I lay down on the massage table, a bunch of different oils and creams were massaged into my skin. I'd never had an experience like that before, but I could feel my fatigue and cramps suddenly improve. My skin looked so glossy too. I felt great.

The time then came for us to be photographed individually for posters.

For some reason, the first outfit I was given to wear was a men's suit.

Of course, I asked why.

"A pantsuit would be one thing, but why a men's suit?!"

"Well, you see… The pantsuits for women weren't ready in time, and this is all we had… Oh, though we do have normal

ladies' suits with skirts."

The stylist gave me this excuse, but she was unable to look me in the eye. She had to be making it up.

During my shoot, racers from the other teams, their managers and assistants, the staff from Silfeed Gospel, and even the women in the camera crew were looking at me with sparkles in their eyes.

Even Farina was spellbound—she was filming me intently with her own Versitool.

Yeah, I thought this might happen.

Once they finished taking a few shots of me in that outfit, one of the other stylists came up to me.

"Miss Noswile, is there another style of outfit or another hairstyle you'd like to try out?" she asked, showing me a number of possible options from a catalog on her tablet computer.

"Let me see... My hair's always been short, so I wouldn't mind having it longer, I guess...?"

The last time I'd grown my hair out had been sometime around my first year of elementary school. Ever since then, I'd kept it short since I'd been told that suited me best. Even so, I occasionally fantasized about growing it out again.

"In that case, there's something we simply *must* try!" said the stylist, confidently escorting me to the back of the aesthetician's salon.

"Please, come in."

As I entered a room that resembled a hospital ward, a woman in a lab coat encouraged me to sit down in a chair that looked more like it belonged in a salon. There was a sink nearby for rinsing customers' hair that was fitted with a console and a monitor. Next to that was a transparent polythene tank containing a milky white fluid.

"Our team at Silfeed Gospel has developed the latest and greatest in hair extensions—the Miracle of the Goddess!" the stylist said proudly as she motioned toward the tank. She was clearly quite excited.

But however I looked at it, I just couldn't see what that tank had to do with hair extensions at all.

"Well, seeing is believing. Let's give it a whirl," she said.

At the insistence of the woman in the lab coat, I sat down in the beautician's chair. Once I was there, she reclined the chair so I was lying down, face up—the same position one would usually

be in to have one's hair washed by a hairdresser.

"All right, I'm going to apply the solution now."

As the woman in the lab coat applied the milky fluid to my scalp, I could feel my head quickly becoming soaked with the liquid.

"Perfect. Now, we'll need you to stay still for about five minutes. I'll transmit the signal now."

As the woman in the lab coat turned her attention to the console, I stayed put as instructed.

An alarm started ringing, and a man in a lab coat and my stylist came in.

"Now, please try sitting up," I was told.

When I did so, my head felt heavier than it had before. The stylist held up a mirror for me, and when I looked at myself in it, I realized that my previously short hair now extended down to my waist.

I was confused. *What just happened?*

"This milky-white fluid—the Miracle of the Goddess—is a new product we've developed. It contains cellular nanomachines, and when they adhere to a customer's hair, they stiffen at the end of each strand and fuse together. We're able to control them using this console, and we can freely change your hair's length and color. In the future, we hope to use this to help men with their hair problems as well as those who have lost their hair as a side effect of medication. We're still researching how to get it to fuse with follicles next to the skin."

I touched my now much longer hair and suddenly felt very moved.

When I returned to the photo studio, everyone was shocked.

When shooting resumed, I was able to try out certain hairstyles for the first time in my life, like a ponytail and a few different braids. At the same time, I put on clothes I never wore—like long, flared skirts, dresses, and knitted sweaters. Once I'd had enough, I asked if I could copy the photo data as a memento.

I have to say though, that gothic lolita outfit with the pigtail hairstyle Aero suggested should never see the light of day.

Now that we'd finished the fashion shoot, we changed back into our own clothes.

"Y'know, I just can't shake the feeling that something's off when I see you with long hair..." Aero said as she tugged at my

hair.

Just as I was considering keeping my hair long, I realized that it might be easier to race with it shorter.

“I wouldn’t mind keeping it like this forever, but is it possible to take this off?”

Normal extensions could be attached and removed as desired, so I asked the stylist about it.

“Of course you can,” said the stylist. After gathering my hair up with a hair tie, she sprayed something that the woman in the lab coat had given her onto my hair.

“First, we tie up the extensions like this, and we spray on this special remover... Then, we wait about ten seconds, and...look, it just pops off!”

The moment the stylist said that, my head felt much lighter.

When I looked down, I saw that she was holding something that, moments earlier, had been part of my hair. Even though I knew it was fake, there was something shocking about seeing part of my hair being torn off so suddenly. I felt somewhat wistful about it.

When the commercial came out a few days later, it was wonderful.

However, seeing the posters made me feel like filing a complaint.

Each racer had two different posters with two different images on each. The concept was that the photo on the right was the racer in her racing suit, and the one on the left showed her transformed as part of Silfeed Gospel’s beauty plan.

Everyone else had cute, totally normal outfits, but for some reason, I was the only one dressed in a men’s suit and a gothic lolita dress with pigtails.

Afterword

To everyone who’s here for the first time, nice to meet you. And to those who already know me, welcome back.

After somehow managing to release this third volume, I have to express my thanks to a lot of people. That includes the publisher, my illustrator, hamm-sama, and my readers.

Though I apologize for making a rare reference to my personal life here, I went to file a tax return for the first time in my life the other day.

What was it like? Although the office was dripping with the same atmosphere as a hospital waiting room, there were no children, probably due to the nature of the business conducted there. I could hear nothing but the solemn sounds of people tapping at keyboards and gliding pens over documents—truly a strange space to find oneself in. Plus, the documents were so complicated that I didn’t know what was what…

On top of that, I had to wait two hours to be let into the lobby. Since it then took about three hours to process everything, it took a lot of patience to make it through.

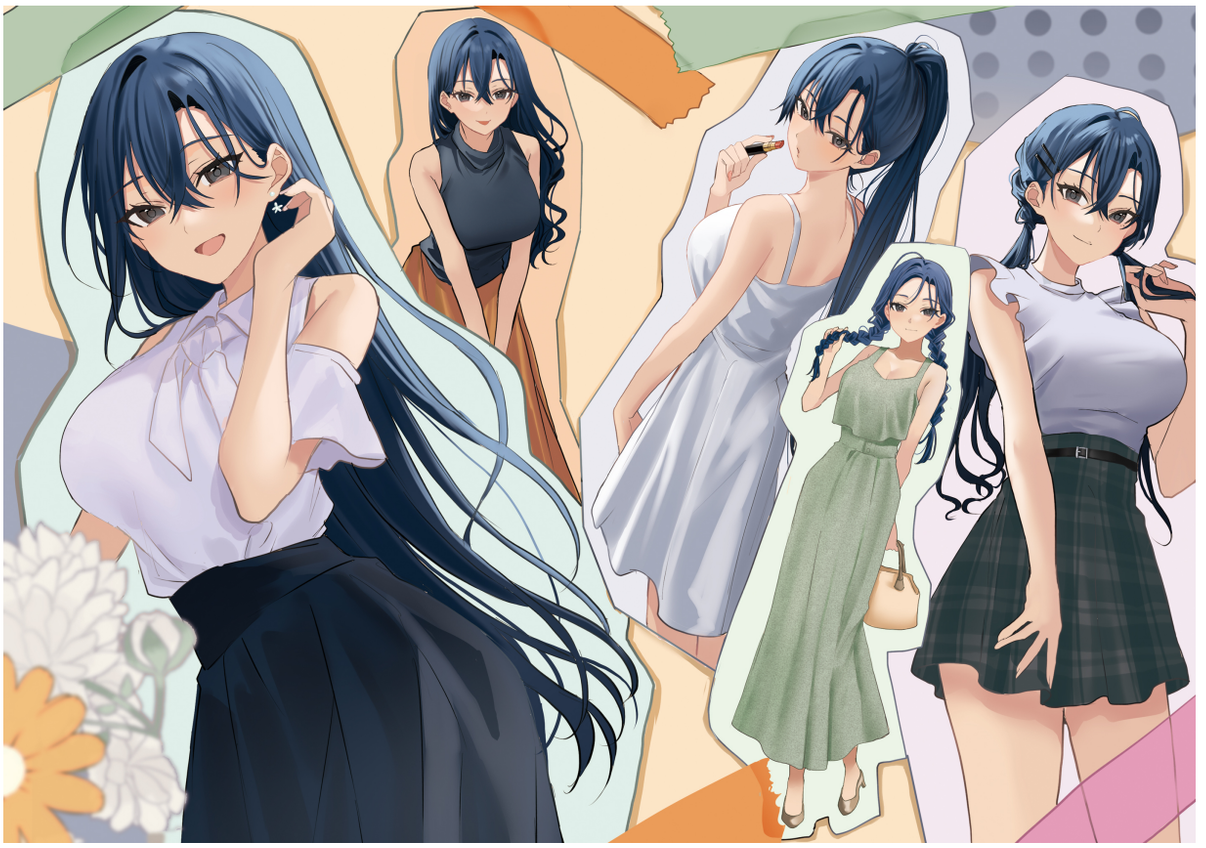
However, when I considered the fact that I might never have experienced this without my work being recognized and published, I almost started to think of it as a happy memory. Strange.

May the next volume be published in turn…

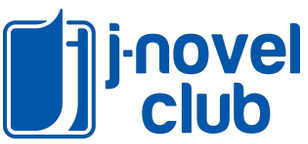
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